

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

VOLUME
11

Author:

EDA

Illust:

Kochimo



VISIT...

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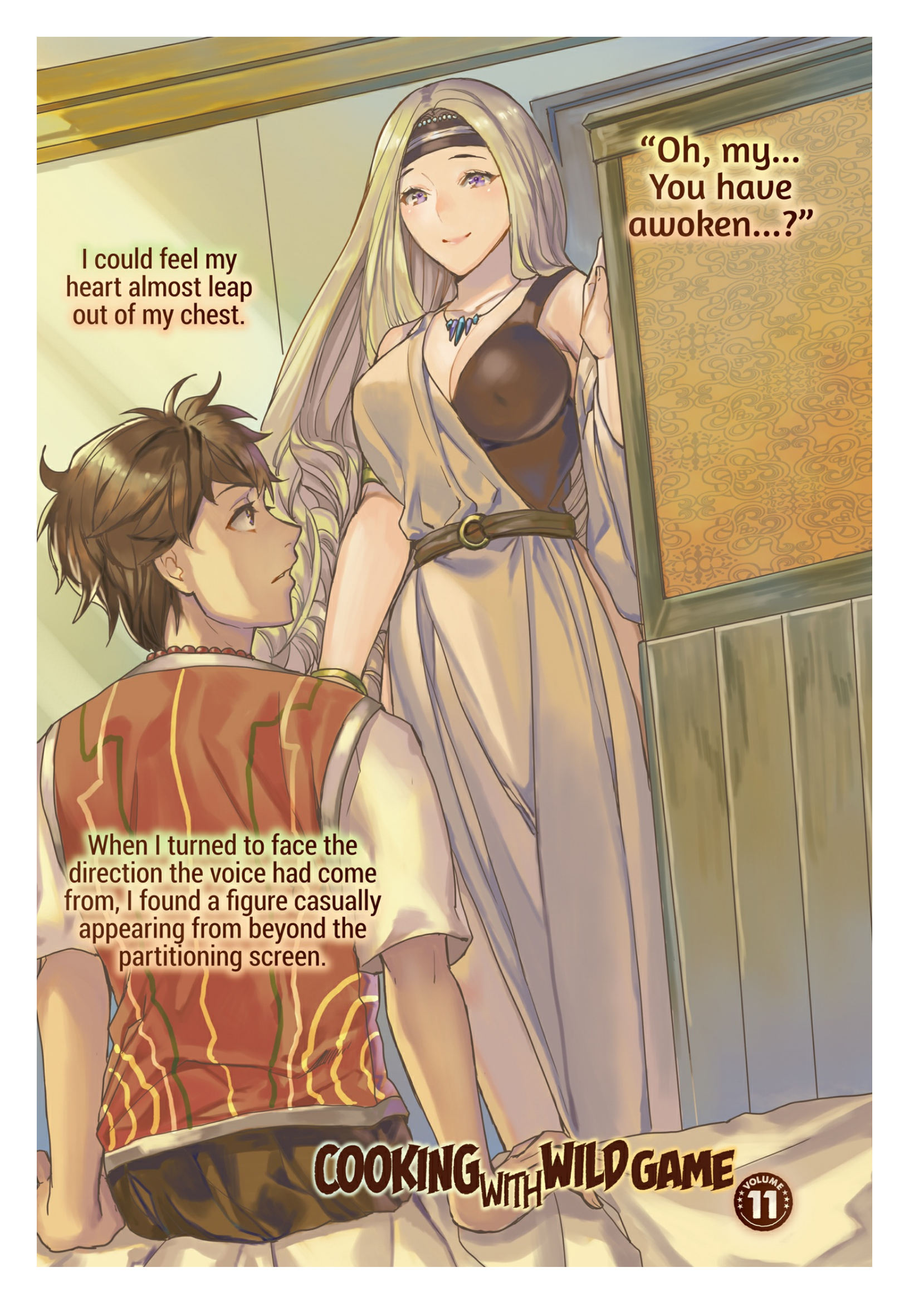
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I could feel my heart almost leap out of my chest.

“Oh, my...
You have awoken...?”

When I turned to face the direction the voice had come from, I found a figure casually appearing from beyond the partitioning screen.

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*** VOLUME ***
11



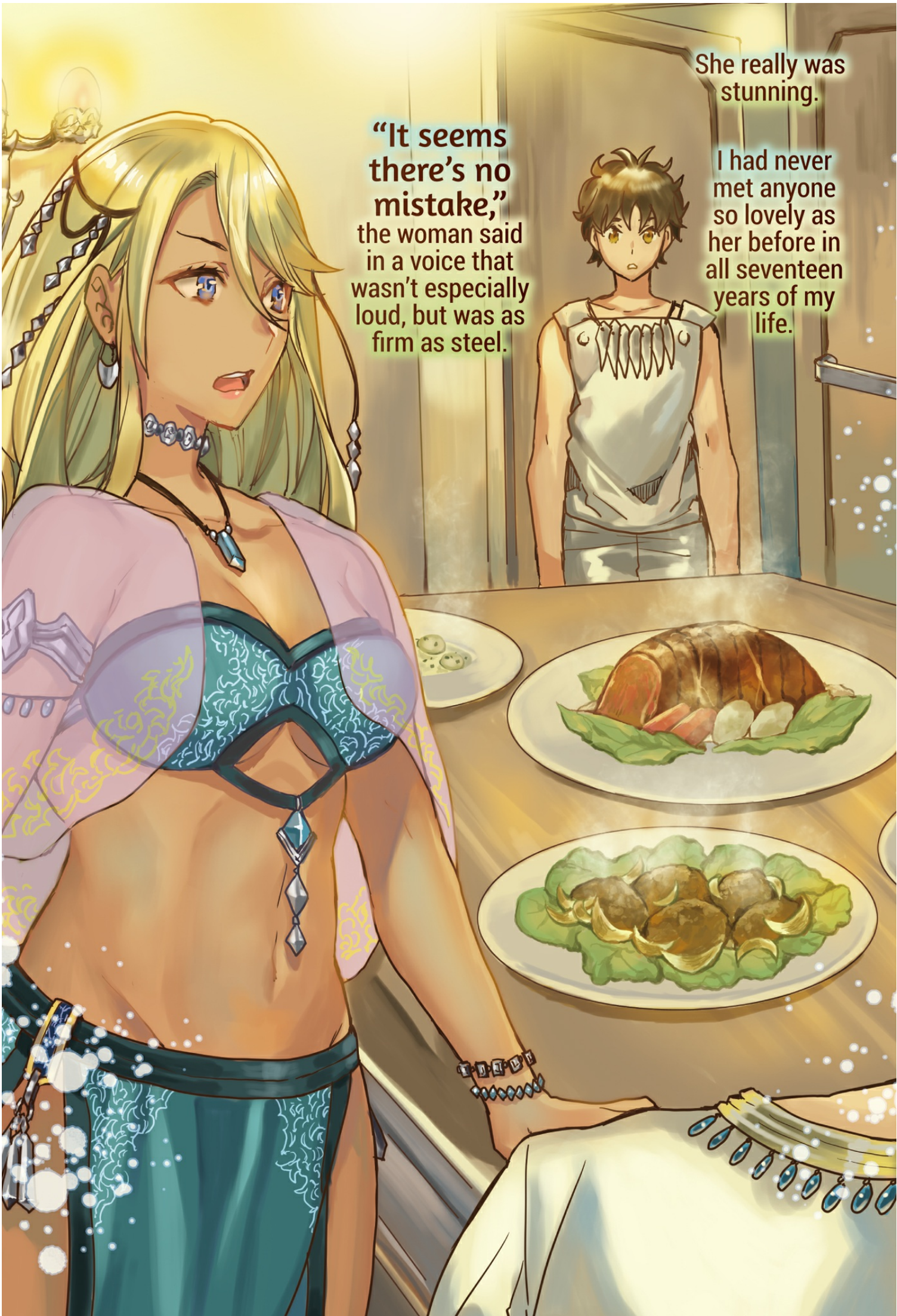
“I am unsure how to answer that... I was ordered to help with dressing you after all, Sir Asuta...”

“Wh-Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Is something the matter...?”

Chiffon Chel questioned, smiling from beyond the white haze.

With that, her hand circled around to her back, and her white gown slid down to her feet.



She really was
stunning.

**“It seems
there’s no
mistake,”**
the woman said
in a voice that
wasn’t especially
loud, but was as
firm as steel.

I had never
met anyone
so lovely as
her before in
all seventeen
years of my
life.

MENU

Chapter 1: Day of Change

Chapter 2: A Childish Tyrant

Chapter 3: Enduring the Days

Chapter 4: The Day of Reunion

Epilogue: Confession

Intermezzo: Adventure
Down Drunkard Way

Chapter 1: Day of Change

1

As the fifth day of the white month dawned, it wasn't like we sensed any omens of things being off.

Four days ago, on the night of the first day of the month, Dora had been attacked by brigands. Then the next day Milano Mas's daughter almost got abducted, and someone sneaked into the Zaza settlement at nighttime. And the night after that, we ended up facing off with Goram Redbeard's son Jeeda at the Fa house. That was certainly a lot for just the first three days of the month.

Perhaps it was only natural, but we had been bracing ourselves more and more as time went on. But as if to mock the tension we were feeling, the fourth day of the white month passed on by without incident, leaving us to feel somehow let down coming into this morning.

"You absolutely mustn't let your guard down, Asuta. It's incredibly easy for people to let themselves become slack at times such as this, after all," Ai Fa stated with a strict look as I finished up loading my prepared food into the wagon.

She had decided that she would come to town on guard duty every other day, and this was the point in her rotation where she stayed home instead. And so I firmed up my resolve as best I could and replied, "Understood," with a nod. "You take care too, Ai Fa. The number of giba around here should be on the rise again, right?"

"Indeed. There have been more and more giba about since the start of the month. In fact, I hear tell that one of the Ran men was seriously injured just yesterday."

"Seriously? That's definitely concerning."

The morning sun and gentle breeze felt pleasant, and it was an extremely tranquil morning all around. However, the topic we were discussing was

anything but.

“Hey, do clans like the Fa and Ran have break periods like the hunters of the Ruu?”

As she stroked Gilulu’s neck, Ai Fa turned and went, “Hmm?” with a questioning look. “I explained as much before, but giba periodically shift their foraging grounds in search of more plentiful food. As they eat up the fruits, roots, small plants, and the like, they then move from north to south or vice versa, frequently moving all about the forest.”

“Right. And that process is what led them to leave the forest and go after the Genos fields, isn’t it? I remember.”

“Indeed. As that occurs, the areas of the forest that have been picked clean take some time to flourish once again. And so for a time the giba won’t go near there, and the hunters living in the area take time off. Such periods come around three times a year, but it’s not as if it is fixed which clan will have time off in a certain month or the like.”

“Then all clans get three break periods a year?”

“That’s right. They seem to be eating rather vigorously this time around, so it may not even be a month before we get time off...”

“I see. I’m glad,” I said, unwittingly breaking out in a smile.

Ai Fa, meanwhile, tilted her head and looked rather confused.

“What are you glad about, exactly? If our neighboring clans like the Fou and Ran are unable to hunt giba, it will be difficult to procure meat during that time, you know.”

“But by then the Ruu will start hunting again, so I don’t think it should be an issue. We may even be able to buy meat from the Sauti soon enough, too... Still, putting all that aside, aren’t you glad to have a chance to rest up?”

“I train hard during break periods. Of course, that doesn’t compare to hunting work, but it’s still not enough of a difference for me to feel happy or displeased over,” Ai Fa bluntly answered. “And besides, there’s no guarantee that our issues with the nobles will be cleared up before that coming break period.

Because of that, I will not be able to relax my mind even if I have a chance to rest my body.”

“Ah, right... Still, if that can at least get dealt with, then you’ll be able to take it easy. So it really is a good thing, right?”

At the very least, the thought of Ai Fa being able to take half a month off from her dangerous hunting work sounded nice to me. But for some reason, she was giving a displeased pout.

“It would certainly be for the best if you no longer needed to be guarded, but if that happened, there wouldn’t be any reason left for me to go to the post town.”

“Huh? Is that an issue, somehow?”

“It’s boring, being left home alone...”

I was truly, legitimately taken off guard. I had never imagined such words would come from Ai Fa.

“Ah, er, but... I guess I can’t exactly go taking half a month off from my work in the post town too, huh?”

“Of course not,” she replied, grinding her head up against mine. Apparently she considered such an action interchangeable with kicking me in the leg. “I was simply irritated by you gloating away without considering my feelings. You really don’t sympathize enough with your clan head.”

“S-Still, I’m taking a break once every ten days now. If your time off lasts for half a month, then those breaks should overlap once or twice. So I’ll do whatever I can on those days to alleviate your boredom.”

With that, Ai Fa’s head came to a stop.

And then, she stared at me from up close and personal.

“Now that you mention it, your first such days off are fast approaching, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, it’ll be the seventh and eighth of the white month, so the day after tomorrow and the following day.”

“Then I believe I’ll take a day off from hunting in the forest, too. I caught two giba the day before yesterday, so the fatigue has been building up a bit.”

“I see. Then you should definitely go ahead and do so.”

“In that case, you and I will both be off on the eighth of the white month.”

“Yeah, sounds like it.”

“I finally understand what you meant about feeling glad...” Ai Fa said with a smile, from up so close I could feel her breath. That seriously made for one heck of a surprise attack. “This should be your first time taking a break since the clan head meeting, Asuta.”

“Y-Yeah, now that you mention it, I think you’re right.”

“We acted separately until dark on the day of the meeting itself, and on the days before and after you were busy preparing food. Furthermore, you were at the Ruu settlement both times, too.” I was earnestly impressed she could remember all that from so far back. “In that case, it’s been even longer since you have spent a full day in the Fa house... In fact, I was heading into the forest each day before that too, so we must not have spent an entire day together since we built the outdoor stove.”

“That’s some seriously impressive memory, there! I mean, we’re talking more than two months back, right?”

“Indeed. I believe that was around ten days or so after I picked you up out in the forest. So back then, I must not have considered you as utterly irreplaceable as I do now...” she replied, clunking her head into me while still wearing a smile. “Now that I think back on it, when I was spending day and night hunting with my father, our break periods helped to bring us even closer. I’ve never forgotten that feeling...”

“O-Oh, really?”

“Both you and I have work that we need to carry out. However... That may be exactly what makes such days off feel so precious.”

“R-Right...”

“And right now, we’re in the midst of dealing with Cyclaeus, an opponent we

still know little about. I certainly hope that we can at least spend those days peacefully.” With that, Ai Fa stepped back, her eyes sparkling in a manner fitting to a girl her age as she wore the formal expression of a clan head and firmly stated, “Well then, Ludo Ruu’s group should be arriving soon. Keep on striving at your work, but make sure not to let your guard down.”

“Yeah, you too, Ai Fa,” I replied while feeling a bit jumbled up inside.

And so, we set off down our own paths again that morning.

At the time, we gave the same farewell as always, knowing nothing of what trials awaited us today, or what suffering they would bring.



Soon after arriving in the post town, we found a pleasant reunion awaiting us. Once we picked up the stalls from The Kimyuus’s Tail we went to stop and pick up vegetables as always, where we were greeted by Dora and Tara’s smiling faces.

“Dora! You’re doing better already?!”

“Ah, sorry for worrying you, Asuta. And the same to everyone else, too,” Dora said with a grin.

Just seeing that familiar smile was enough to cause me to tear up a bit.

“Hey, what’s with that face? It wasn’t *that* serious of an injury, you know. Didn’t my son tell you that?”

“Yes, but... Well, I’m just really glad to see you doing well. And it’s good seeing you again too, Tara.”

“Yup!” Tara replied, a big smile filling her small face.

“At any rate, I’m glad that you folks look like you’re doing alright, too. So, do you want the same number of vegetables as always?”

“Yes, please.”

With a sort of bashful chuckle, Dora started pulling vegetables out of stuffed bags.

He really was just the same as always. However, there was still gray cloth

wrapped around his right shoulder. He had been attacked by bandits dressed as people of the forest's edge who were looking to rob him, and as a result he had to take three days off of work.

The faint green stains I could spy on his bandages must have been from some sort of medicinal herb. That probably explained the faint stinging odor I was picking up, too. In fact, it was the same sort of smell as the medicine Vina Ruu had used when she hurt her ankle.

"Um, what should I even say about all this... I really am at a loss for words, honestly."

"I'm telling you, there's nothing for you to worry yourself over, Asuta. Outlaws tend to gather in prosperous towns. Honestly, bandits have been just as much of a pain for all of us as giba."

"But bandits dressed like hunters of the forest's edge aren't quite so common, right? Still, I'm relieved to see you're alright, too," Ludo Ruu interjected with a serious look.

Dora shot him a gentle smile back, too.

"No matter how they may dress, they're still bandits. And it's the guards' job to catch them, so there's no need for us to go worrying about all that."

"Yeah, but..." I started to reply, only for some unusual commotion to emerge from the surrounding area.

Instantly, Ludo Ruu's gaze turned back toward the road.

Speak of the devil, huh?

There were a number of guards dressed in leather armor and carrying spears, and they were heading our way.

"Man of the forest's edge, you're Asuta of the Fa clan, aren't you? We have a matter to discuss, so please accompany us back to the station," the man at the head of the group proclaimed.

He was pretty short and thin, but his helmet had a fluttering tassel adorning it. As for the rest of the group, there were five other guards standing there behind him.

“What exactly is this about? I have to get ready for work after this...”

“It won’t take long. There are just a number of matters we’d like to confirm.”

On the one hand, he had a haughty attitude, but on the other, he didn’t seem all that bold. In fact, he looked pretty clearly intimidated by being faced with hunters of the forest’s edge.

“Hey, what business do you have with Asuta, exactly? If it’s about that incident with the bandits from a few days back, my son should have already explained everything,” Dora stated with an angry look, stepping out in front of the guards.

And in response, the little guard captain dubiously knitted his brows.

“And who are you? One of the vegetable sellers who were attacked by those bandits, perhaps? If so, this has nothing to do with all that, so stay out of this.”

“Ah, Dora, I’m the one they’re summoning, so—” I interjected in a fluster, trying to stop him. And then, yet another voice butted in from the side.

“Yeah, you’re treating him like a criminal, dragging him back to your station like that. Are you saying the kid did something wrong?”

To my surprise, when I turned to look I didn’t find any familiar faces. However, there were now around seven or eight unfamiliar ones gathered around us. And that alone was enough to make the little guard captain’s face go pale.

“Wh-Who are you all? I assure you, this is nothing like that! Like I said, we just want to confirm some matters!”

The five guards standing behind him were also adjusting their grips on their spears, bewildered looks on their faces. A restless air had started simmering throughout the street.

“So what matters are you talking about, exactly?”

“It’s not like there’s any proof yet that those bandits were people of the forest’s edge, right?”

“This is real fishy. Out with it. Tell us the reason, already.”

It was possible a good number of them were folks I had seen at the stalls. Around half were southerners, while the other half were from the west. But folks from the south all dressed so similarly, and I didn't see any regulars among the westerners.

And a number of tall figures with their faces hidden under the hoods of their leather cloaks had started filling in the spaces between those townsfolk wearing their serious expressions. Naturally, they were easterners.

"Wh-What do you mean, fishy?! W-We're carrying out official duty, you know," the guard captain shrilly yelled out.

With that, one of the younger guards who at least seemed to have retained a bit of his wits stepped forwards.

"Captain, at this rate we'll simply cause needless turmoil. It's true that it won't take long at all, so wouldn't it be acceptable to simply do it here and now?"

"No, but—"

"I believe it would be less dangerous than dispersing these people in order to bring this man of the forest's edge along with us to the station. If it's alright, I could carry out that task in your place..."

"Right! In that case, I will leave it up to you," the guard captain replied, beating a swift retreat. While forcing back a sigh, the younger guard moved farther forward. Apparently there were all sorts within their organization.

"Asuta of the Fa clan, of the forest's edge. What we wish to confirm are details about the bandit who attacked you all on the 31st day of the blue month."

"The bandit who attacked us...?" I repeated, my heart skipping a beat at that unexpected statement.

With a nod, the young guard replied, "Right. We received a report from a resident of the vicinity, stating that a bandit in a fur cloak pulled a blade and attacked you all while you were walking through the residential district on the 31st. And we were told the assailant had a small build that implied they were a woman or child, and that they had blazing red hair. Is that all correct?"

The matter with Jeeda had reached the guards after all.

I gripped my fists tight, then nodded back and said, “Yes...”

I couldn’t give any testimony that would put Jeeda in a bad spot. However, I also couldn’t exactly go lying and making myself into a criminal, either.

“Why did you not place a report that same day? By leaving bandits like that be, you place your fellow citizens at risk.”

“My apologies. He only seemed concerned with the people of the forest’s edge, so I believed he wouldn’t cause anyone else harm,” I replied, giving the same answer I had once offered to Sanjura.

And in turn, I got the same sort of response back.

“That’s no reason not to report him, though. By leaving him be, you risk being placed in danger again yourselves, don’t you?”

“Yes. However, if he has a just reason for hating the people of the forest’s edge, then I was thinking it would be better to solve things by talking them out. But that wouldn’t be possible if he’s arrested as a criminal first...”

The guard went silent, a gloomy look on his face.

And the crowd surrounding us were all watching with expressions full of suspicion and concern.

“Still, you’re ultimately just thinking of your own circumstances, there... Drawing a blade in town is undoubtedly a crime, and furthermore, not even reporting such a criminal and choosing instead to let them be is clearly making light of the laws of Genos.”

“Yes, I also believe it was thoughtless of us... But it seemed he had been watching us from afar for a while. When we noticed that and chased after him it resulted in violence, but if it weren’t for that I don’t believe he would have drawn his blade.”

“However, judging crimes is a task assigned to our guard corps and the legal officers. As mere citizens, you all have no authority to pardon a criminal.”

Now it was my turn to be struck silent.

Dora started to argue, “Hey, but—” only for the guard to break out in an even more sour expression.

“It’s not as if we came here in order to punish you for that. Just note that such actions won’t be permitted in the future. You people of the forest’s edge are full-fledged citizens of Genos and the western kingdom. And so, as children of Selva, you have a responsibility to uphold the law and a right to be protected by it.”

“Right,” I replied with a cautious nod.

Dora and the rest of the crowd seemed rather surprised by the guard’s words... but the hunters with us cautiously narrowed their gazes as they carefully listened.

“So, the bandit’s appearance didn’t differ from the earlier description I gave? If you can remember his face and the like more clearly, we could put out a detailed description.”

“My apologies, but I didn’t see that clearly... His unkempt hair covered his face too, so I couldn’t make out his features very well,” I replied, offering just a bit of false testimony.

After shooting me a doubtful glare for a few moments, the young guard finally said, “Well, fine,” with a shake of his head. “At any rate, red-haired westerners are unusual, and combined with the fact that he has a small build like that of a child, that should be enough for a wanted poster. And that bandit was wearing the fur cloak of some other animal than a giba?”

“Yes. The coloring of the fur was something I hadn’t really seen around Genos.”

“There shouldn’t be many folks other than hunters out there wearing fur cloaks, either... Hey, you vegetable seller,” the man called out, turning toward Dora with an arrogant look. “Were the bandits who attacked you really wearing giba pelts? Apparently the one who attacked these folks wore one that was a lighter color, with a pattern to it.”

“It was dark, so I can’t say for certain... But they were definitely wearing necklaces made with giba tusks,” Dora responded, looking displeased at having

to say so. “I already explained to you all that the people of the forest’s edge would never do such a—”

“We’re aware. You don’t need to keep raising your voice over every little thing,” the guard said with an annoyed wave of his hand, and then in a slightly louder voice he proclaimed, “This seems like a good opportunity, so allow me to inform everyone here: Last night, there was an attack on another plantation’s storehouse performed by bandits dressed as hunters of the forest’s edge.”

“Huh?!” I found myself shouting without thinking.

I had thought that yesterday was our first peaceful day in a while, but it turns out disaster struck again without us knowing.

“There were three of them wearing giba pelt cloaks, with cloth wrapped around their faces. Though their identities remain unknown, it seems certain that these are the same bandits who struck four days ago.”

The surrounding crowd started to murmur. And by this point it was more than the initial ten or so folks, as a good number of people had come and stopped to see what the commotion was all about.

So that everyone present could hear him, the young guard raised his voice even further and stated, “After the incident four days back, the militia’s nighttime guard was strengthened. And yet in spite of that, innocent citizens were once again attacked and had their precious crops stolen. This is a gravely concerning situation... Even more so since those bandits were dressed in the clothing of the forest’s edge.”

“Hey, but that’s—”

“Stop talking and listen. If the people of the forest’s edge wished to hide their identities, they would start with those cloaks and necklaces. To hide their faces without doing so seems dubious in the extreme. Therefore, we are strongly considering the view that these are the acts of criminals pretending to be hunters of the forest’s edge,” the young guard firmly proclaimed.

I could hear a number of impressed sounding oohs coming from the crowd.

“Naturally we will not know the truth until we capture these bandits, but take care not to be misled by baseless rumors. And you mustn’t cause a commotion

over the treatment of the people of the forest's edge, like what happened before. Do not go disparaging them without proof... These words come from the militia leader Sir Ciluel himself, and should be distributed as an official notice throughout the post town today."

Hearing those words put me on guard, and also seriously shook me.

The militia leader was Cyclaeus's younger brother, so for him to clearly and openly defend the people of the forest's edge... It didn't seem like the sort of straightforward good news I could simply feel relieved over.

The young guard looked just a bit prideful as he glanced out over the murmuring crowd. I got the impression that he was condescending to us just a touch, like what he was proud of was that they treated even outsiders like the people of the forest's edge justly.

That might have honestly been how the man truly felt. However, I couldn't help but be suspicious of the intentions of that militia leader whose words he was conveying.

Just what exactly are they plotting now...?

As for the crowd, they looked perplexed as they listened to the guard's words. Some of them appeared relaxed and relieved, while others clicked their tongues and left.

Seeing those unfriendly reactions toward the people of the forest's edge, it was like I could feel a dark cloud billowing up inside of me.

Could that be what Cyclaeus had been aiming for?

To give favorable treatment to the people of the forest's edge and advocate for them, sowing distrust in the hearts of the townsfolk... Was that the true goal behind having those bandits crudely play at disguising themselves and attack plantations?

If I'm just overthinking things, then it's fine. But...

What if it really was like Ai Fa had once speculated, that this was a plot to thrust these crimes upon the three hunters who accompanied Kamyua Yoshu? What would happen if we were getting "unjust" protection on top of that?

Would it be possible to once more instill doubts in the townsfolk that the people of the forest's edge wouldn't be punished no matter what wrongdoing they may get up to? People we were close to like Dora were one thing, but for the folks who were just now listening to that guard with relief on their faces... Was it possible the people of the forest's edge could once more lose the trust of those who had been advocating for us with righteous indignation?

Still, would Cyclaeus even stand to gain anything from such actions?

Up till now, I wouldn't have been able to answer that. But thanks to my talk with Yamiru Lea two days prior, I had a new hypothesis to go on: that Cyclaeus was trying to reinstate the Suun as the leading clan in order to make the people of the forest's edge easier to control, forcing things back to the way they used to be.

If that turned out to be true... If he wanted to return us to a state of being misunderstood and impoverished, forced to desperately hunt giba just to survive, then there might well be significant meaning to shattering the bonds between the forest's edge and the post town.

I certainly wouldn't mind if that was all just my imagination getting the better of me, though...

It definitely wouldn't be such a bad thing if it turned out Cyclaeus wasn't as wicked and crafty as I thought. I was just preparing for the worst, so that the rug wouldn't be pulled out from under us. And no matter how fanciful my imagination may be, I was still going to inform Zasshuma and Donda Ruu about that hypothesis, too.

After all, we absolutely had to win this fight, no matter what.

2

And so, after somewhat of a delay, we finally got started with our work for the day.

First, that meant opening up the stalls like always.

The group for today consisted of Reina, Sheera, and Lala Ruu. I felt bad for her, but apparently Rimee Ruu's participation still hadn't been approved by her

mother.

From what I heard, Mia Lea Ruu's opinion was that though the people we had on guard made things less dangerous, it was best to wait until after the next meeting on the 15th of the white month and see how things play out. I didn't know how much Donda Ruu's doting nature toward his youngest daughter was having an influence there, though.

"Ehehe. I feel bad for Rimee, but I'll go ahead and work as much as I like in the meantime!"

Unsurprisingly, that statement had come from Lala Ruu.

No matter what she said about feeling bad, it seemed she really didn't want to yield her time working in the post town to her little sister. At any rate, I was grateful to see that everyone was so passionate about the job.

"Still, Tara's really been wanting to see Rimee Ruu, so I hope the time comes soon when she can work here in the post town, too," I threw out there, only for Lala Ruu to instantly take offense.

"What, so you prefer Rimee to me? I get along with that Tara runt pretty well too, don't I?"

"I know, I know. Still, don't you think it's important for a big sister to think of her younger sibling?"

"Don't talk to me like a kid! It's not like I'm trying to be mean to Rimee or anything!" Lala Ruu retorted, puffing her cheeks.

And then, Ludo Ruu went and poured gasoline on the fire.

"Ah, so you don't want to let Rimee take over while Shin Ruu's around? I mean, us guards will be sticking around until at least the day of the conference."

"That is not! What I'm saying! In the least!" Lala Ruu shouted, swinging with all her might, only for Ludo Ruu to dodge by swaying backwards. What a truly friendly exchange between siblings.

Just a bit earlier, Zasshuma had stopped by to get in touch as he'd been regularly doing, and that was when we took care of the far less peaceful

matters.

“So, reversing the recent trend of increasing trust toward the people of the forest’s edge, eh? Sounds like you’ve done some deep thinking again,” Zasshuma had stated. “Still, if we’re talking about Cyclaeus, I could see him coming up with something like that. I’ve never met him personally, but he’s a seriously crafty old man, right?”

“I haven’t ever seen him either. I just tried thinking like the villain in some big conspiracy.”

“Hmph, you sure are something else. You don’t just cook, but you can think up stuff like that too, eh?” Zasshuma said with a grin, rubbing his tanned cheek. “Just keep on piling caution on top of caution like that. And actually... there’s a big meeting scheduled to be held at the castle starting today.”

“A big meeting?”

“Yeah, that’s right. From what I’ve heard, it’ll last for five days, from today till the ninth of the white month, with the nobles in charge of politics packing into the castle to discuss the future of Genos. So during that time, Cyclaeus and his younger brother won’t be able to make a move, but we won’t exactly be able to get in contact with Lord Melfried either.”

“I see. So that’s why we need to be even more cautious, huh?”

“Yup. It’s better to be extra careful rather than letting your guard down... Besides, they probably have plenty of pawns on their end to handle their dirty work, too,” Zasshuma said with a shrug of his thick shoulders. “Ideally The Northern Whirlwind and his team would return around now and that’d make things a lot simpler, but unsurprisingly I haven’t heard from him at all.”

“Really? If my suspicions turn out to be true, then they’re the ones in the greatest danger... I really am a bit worried.”

“Hmph. Still, I’d feel like a fool worrying about a group like that. We’re talking about The Northern Whirlwind and three hunters of the forest’s edge. Even if a militia battalion surrounded them, they wouldn’t have much difficulty busting through. Of course... if they did that, they may well end up branded as traitors.”

If that happened, it would be like a repeat of how the Red Beards were wiped

out ten years ago.

As long as Melfried was keeping a watchful eye I couldn't imagine Cyclaeus acting so openly, but it was impossible to know just how far he would sink. Just how unscrupulous would he be if push came to shove?

"At any rate, we've got to keep our guard up till The Northern Whirlwind's group returns, so that our feet aren't swept out from under us. I can't imagine you being endangered so easily with those hunters from the forest's edge guarding you, but you should still make sure to remain vigilant."

With that final warning, Zasshuma had departed.

A five-day period where neither Cyclaeus nor Melfried can easily make a move, huh? It's true that something about that definitely sounds suspicious.

If we were assuming the worst, then this was exactly the period when we needed to be most on guard. And that went doubly so considering the guards' unusual actions from this morning.

As I toiled away with such thoughts filling my head, Yumi showed up, marking the first time I had seen her in a bit.

"Hey there! Sorry it's been so long since I was last able to stop by."

"Ah, no, that's down to me only being here till the sun hits its peak. So, how did things go with your father...?"

"It looks like that hardhead has finally made up his mind!" Yumi replied, leaning in with a dazzling smile. She wanted to serve giba cooking at her family's inn too, but her father was the owner and he was firmly opposed, so she was in the midst of trying to convince him.

"Could you come by our place today or tomorrow? Apparently he at least wants to give talking with you a shot!"

"I see. You really worked hard there, Yumi."

"I didn't do anything," she said with a wave of her hand. "All I did was tell my dad each night how I honestly felt after eating your delicious cooking! Ah, what a wonderful five days it's been."

"I'm certainly glad to hear you say that. But you heard about the plantation

being attacked by bandits, didn't you...?"

I also went ahead and told her how Milano Mas's daughter had almost been abducted, too. Yumi had started off the conversation smiling, but her expression was steadily growing more and more grim.

"Hmm... A whole lot's happened over these last few days, huh? When you say the daughter of The Kimyuus's Tail's owner, I guess you mean that sort of fragile-seeming girl... Yeah, I could see her not being so good at handling ruffians."

"Right. And so, honestly, I can't help but worry that I might end up bringing trouble to your place, too..."

"What are you saying?! This is not the time to worry about that sort of thing," Yumi said with a smile, then crossed her arms under her prominent chest.



At that point, she leaned her head back in kind of a provocative manner, then shot me a sidelong glare. Her lips were twisted into a dauntless grin, and one eyebrow was raised in a way that made me feel like she was looking down on me... It was like she had suddenly returned to the delinquent-esque girl from the day we had first met.

“Right, I don’t think I’ve said it, but our customers aren’t exactly as classy as the folks who use The Kimyuus’s Tail. We get our fair share of rogues all the time, and it’s not like bloodshed’s all that rare either. We’re an inn that’s always handling ruffians.”

“Ah, um, really?”

“Yeah, that’s right. In fact, I threw some fruit wine in the face of a drunk who tried to grab my butt just yesterday. There are a lot of ruffians around here in the post town, so you’ve got to be prepared to at least go that far if you don’t want folks looking down on you,” she replied with a sneer, facing aside as she did so. It really did feel like I had traveled back a month or so. “So you don’t need to worry about us. Still, I guess there’s no helping it if you only want to deal with the nicer inns around.”

“N-No, of course not. And it’s reassuring to hear that you and your family can protect yourselves.”

“You really think so...?”

“Huh? Ah, yeah.”

“You’re not regretting getting close to a girl like me?”

“Of course I’m not.”

“I see... I’m glad,” Yumi said with a sigh, bringing a hand to her smooth forehead.

Then she looked up again, her expression once more that of the good-natured working girl.

“I already let you see it when we first met, but that’s the sort of girl I normally am. I don’t back down even around men, and I’ve ended up in the care of the guards more than just once or twice... To you, I probably just seem like another

one of those ruffians around town, right?”

“That’s not true. I was a bit surprised just now since it’s been a while since I’d seen it, but I know that’s just another important aspect of who you are,” I replied.

Yumi let out an incomprehensible “Urk!” while brushing up her long hair. “Yup, that’s right. Neither is an act, and they’re both the real me. I’m always smiling away when I’m in front of you, so I figured maybe you’d hate me being the other way... but is it really alright?”

“It’s fine. Though I’ll admit I feel a little more relaxed when you’re just smiling.”

“Hmph! You sure do seem like you had a pampered upbringing, even though you’re a person of the forest’s edge!” she wailed in an almost desperate tone while glaring straight at me. And honestly, it was real cute how her bashfulness was clearly showing on her cheeks. “So, what do you say? Can you stop by The Westerly Wind today or tomorrow?”

“Well, today’s a little packed with work, but I’d be glad to do so tomorrow.”

“Got it. Tomorrow it is. Ah, and my old man has the look of a real scoundrel to him, so be prepared for that, alright?”

“Gah, really? Thanks for warning me in advance.”

Yumi broke out in a cheerful grin when she heard that.

“Well then, I’m heading back. Today I’m getting enough for me and my mom, so I’ll take two.”

And so, Yumi left with the two finished myamuu giba in hand.

Lala Ruu had patiently waited the whole time, but now she tugged at my sleeve and said, “Hey, are you alright expanding your business again and again like that? If that Kimyuus place decides to work with you too, then you’ll be selling your cooking to four inns in total, right?”

“Yeah, I should be able to make do somehow.”

I had roughly three and a half hours to devote to work in the evening. Currently, I was spending an hour each at The Sledgehammer and The Great

Southern Tree, and the rest giving Milano Mas cooking lessons.

At this rate, if The Kimyuus's Tail and The Westerly Wind both started working with me too it'd be kind of a harsh schedule, but it wasn't like I had no room to improve my workflow. In fact, it wasn't even that difficult to solve. I just needed to finish the prep work at home in order to cut down the time I needed to spend at each inn.

Since entrusting the giba burger preparations to Reina and Sheera Ruu, I had gained a good bit of leeway with my work at home. If I could just wrap up development of my new dish, I could devote that time to preparing instead.

But before that, I needed to come up with a kimyuus or karon dish for The Kimyuus's Tail that could compete with giba meat cooking, as well as win over the owner of The Westerly Wind, who wasn't fond of the people of the forest's edge. That was ultimately what I needed to worry about first.

Above all else, though, was the matter with Cyclaeus. Like I had told Yumi, I intended to hold off on officially expanding my business till the meeting in ten days was over.

We've got no idea what sort of methods he may use to try to take down us people of the forest's edge. So for now, I've just got to carefully watch how the situation plays out.

That might well have gone both for those of us trying to form bonds with the post town and also for Cyclaeus's side which was trying to sever those bonds. It wasn't something I could be certain of, but to me, lying low and firming up our foothold seemed like a smart plan.

"Sorry for the wait, Asuta," a voice suddenly called out.

When I turned to look, I found Li Sudra standing next to the stalls, accompanied by the Rutim men who had been acting as bodyguards.

"Huh? Has the sun hit its peak already?"

"Yes... Is something the matter?"

"No, it just sort of snuck up on me, I guess."

Yumi had shown up again for the first time in a while today, but there were

still other customers I really wanted to talk with who hadn't come by.

Diel had said she wouldn't be able to come for a while, so I guess there was no helping that. But I found it a bit regrettable that I hadn't been able to meet with Mikel or Sanjura. There was a lot I wanted to ask that charcoal seller about in regards to his wares, in particular.

Well, I guess I'll have plenty of chances from tomorrow on. Still, what happened with Sanjura, exactly...?

I didn't especially have any business with the man. It was just that I'd been seeing him every day for a while now, so I couldn't help but feel a bit lonely.

Did his right arm finally heal and he started working again? I'd be glad to hear so, but still... He's a wanderer who moves from one place to another. He said he'd like to visit the forest's edge, too... If he were to suddenly leave Genos, I'd definitely feel pretty sad about it, I thought, despite such feelings seeming rather unfitting. Was I overlapping him with Shumiral in my head after all?

Shumiral's hair was silver while Sanjura's was chestnut colored, both unusual for easterners, but it wasn't like they really resembled one another all that much. Still, Sanjura had such a gentle manner and acted so friendly that I'd grown quite fond of him.

Are Shumiral and Pops and everyone doing well...? I thought to myself as I set off for The Sledgehammer with Reina Ruu.

For today, we had four guards. After leaving the stalls to the young hunters of the Rutim, Ludo and Shin Ruu accompanied us alongside the two men from the branch families whose names I didn't know.

"Hey, just let me ask one more time... Does it really seem like that Jeeda kid won't be coming after us anymore?" Ludo Ruu asked, cautiously glancing around the surrounding area.

"Yeah. At the very least, Ai Fa and I think so."

"Hmm... In that case, we're back to where we don't even know what to look out for, huh? It'll be for the best if nothing happens, but it's hard to stay motivated in that case, y'know?" Ludo Ruu grumbled, but even still, there remained a sharp look in his eyes.

In actuality, staying on guard against an enemy for hours on end with no idea how best to do so had to take a significant toll on one's nerves.

The Ruu and the clans under them had been off for roughly half a month now, and this group had spent pretty much all of that time on guard duty. Honestly, I was seriously hoping that when I took a break for two days starting the day after tomorrow, they would take the chance to get some real rest.

"Alright, I can count on you to handle things inside, right, Shin Ruu?"

And so, we had safely arrived at The Sledgehammer again today. Ludo Ruu and the two young men from the branch houses remained outside, while Reina Ruu, Shin Ruu, and I stepped through the door into the inn.

"I've been awaiting your arrival, Asuta," the owner Nail greeted with his usual expressionless look. There didn't seem to be any customers around today either, and so silence soon fell back over the room.

Now that I thought about it, aside from Mikel three days back, I had never seen a customer at The Sledgehammer since I started working here.

"Most customers are generally out doing business or eating at this time of day. If we were always busy, I would certainly find it difficult to run this inn all on my own."

"Ah, I see. Well, I guess pretty much any inn would be deserted around this time."

And The Sledgehammer was the smallest inn I knew, which made it feel all the more empty.

"We actually do have customers remaining up on the second floor today, though, much as that is unusual. They wore rather intense expressions, so perhaps they're handling some difficult business dealings or the like."

"I see... Um, they're not... obvious criminals or anything, are they?"

"They're not. One is a westerner in rather fine clothing, and the other is a gentle-mannered customer from the east. And one of them has been staying for quite some time, so there shouldn't be any need to worry. I've been trying to stay cautious in my own way, so please, be at ease."

I seriously felt bad about causing the inn owners such worries. Nail in particular seemed to be trying especially hard to form a bond with the people of the forest's edge, so that made me feel even worse.

"Ah, this is the meat for today."

"You have my thanks."

There was around 2.5 kilos of sirloin coated in pico leaves in the leather bag. After handing over the payment and accepting the bag, Nail swiftly went about transferring the contents to a jar filled with salt.

"By the way, are you going to be alright with meat for 50 meals tomorrow, like we discussed?" I asked while starting my cooking preparations.

"No," Nail replied with a shake of his head. "My apologies, but I wish to change the amount. I'm sorry for the sudden request, but would it be possible to raise the amount to enough for 70 meals?"

"Huh? 70? That certainly is a lot."

"Yes. Fortunately my simple giba cooking was received rather favorably, so I believe I should be able to sell that much during the two days that you are away."

I was certainly glad to hear that. The Fa and the other nearby clans had steadily been catching giba, too, so there would be no problem sourcing the meat.

"In that case, I'll prepare enough for 70 meals. I really can't express how grateful I am, Nail."

"I feel much the same way. Word has spread about giba cooking quite a bit lately, and so my dining hall has been packed night after night at dinner time," Nail replied, the corners of his mouth twitching. He must have been desperately holding back a smile as best he could. It was times like this when it really showed that he wasn't quite as skilled at hiding his expressions as easterners were. "I've started bringing in help from nearby just for that time of day, and yet I've still been earning plenty of profit. Even more importantly, I've been able to bring my customers joy and satisfaction."

“It really does make me glad to hear that. And I look forward to continuing to work with you after my two days off.”

“As do I.”

It was then that a low voice called from outside the kitchen, “Is the owner around?”

I hadn’t heard the door to the inn open, so one of the customers from upstairs must have come down. After giving me a nod, Nail replied, “Yes, I’m coming now,” and headed that way.

“Alright, then how about we get to work too?”

“Right,” Reina Ruu nodded back with a smile.

Shin Ruu had been standing by the window, but perhaps in order to exercise the necessary caution since there was technically an outsider approaching, he somewhat quickly walked toward the entrance to the kitchen.

But then, before he could get there, some large figures stepped inside.

“Don’t say a word.”

Reina Ruu and I were left petrified, while Shin Ruu swiftly dropped into a battle-ready pose.

However, the young hunter was unable to do anything further.

Two men had entered the kitchen. One of them had one arm tightly wrapped around Nail to restrain him... and his other arm had a silver knife up against the man’s throat.

“Who are you?” Shin Ruu quietly asked, despite the fires burning bright in his eyes.

“I told you not to speak,” the man replied, pushing the knife closer without any hesitation. Though he wasn’t pressing the cutting edge to his throat directly, it must have still been touching, as there was a thin red line clearly visible.

Even so, Nail didn’t move a muscle. As to why... he had clearly fainted.

“We know that you have allies out front. If you try to pull anything, then we’ll

cut this man down here and now.”

I had no clue what was going on... but for the time being, I couldn't say a word.

We had just been having a peaceful conversation, but now Nail was unconscious and in the hands of some thug. It all just felt completely unreal.

As for the thugs... That was the only way I could think to describe them... Their faces were hidden, wrapped up in gray cloth like Melfried had once done. And their clothing, they were just very common leather cloaks and cloth attire. And they had their hoods pulled down so far that I couldn't even make out the color of their eyes.

However, one of them seemed to be an easterner. He was tall and slender, and from what I could see of his arms and legs through the cloak, he had dark skin. There was a long sword dangling at his hip, while his left hand was holding a knife.

The other man was probably a westerner. Though he seemed taller than me, he had a short and stout build, and tanned-looking skin. He was the one holding Nail with a knife pressed to his throat.

“If you follow our instructions, we'll let this man go. No one's blood needs to be shed. You're Asuta of the Fa clan, aren't you...?” the stout man asked in a muffled voice.

In the meantime, the tall man kept a firm gaze on Shin Ruu, keeping his movements in check.

“Our employer would like to greet you as a guest. Come along with us. If you do so, we'll let this man go.”

“Your employer...?”

Did he mean Cyclaeus? I couldn't think of anyone else who would be trying something like this at the moment.

Still, just like with Milano Mas's daughter, even if the idea was to have them pretend to be outlaws with grudges against the people of the forest's edge, to bare their fangs at us so openly... If they were going to trample all over the laws

of Genos this obviously, could even Cyclaeus brush it under the rug?

There was no time to be worrying about that now, though. And so, while forcing my panicked mind to somehow calm itself, I replied, “You want to welcome me as a guest? That’s completely absurd. Who invites someone as a guest while threatening them with knives?!”

“Don’t go running your mouth...” the man emotionlessly answered, again gripping his knife tighter.

With that, Nail’s blood started falling drop by drop onto the floor.

“Stop it! Don’t hurt him!”

Though I was thinking more clearly, I still wasn’t able to hold back the rage bubbling forth in me.

Just how far were these two planning to go, exactly?

“Do you really think you’ll get away with doing something like this in the middle of the post town? We have allies right outside, and the guards have their patrols too, you know.”

Or would the guard look the other way for these villains?

No, I just couldn’t imagine they would be able to do something like that right in the middle of the day. Besides, between the guards this morning and what I could infer from Mikel’s words, the guys at the bottom didn’t seem to all blindly follow Cyclaeus’s orders. And I couldn’t imagine them openly ignoring the laws of Genos where the people of the post town could see.

Still, to pull something like this with just the two of them... Even if they have a hostage, couldn’t a hunter of the forest’s edge still turn the tables on them?

Shin Ruu was a mere two meters away from the men. Considering how much more skilled hunters of the forest’s edge were than normal folks, it really did feel like we could expect him to pull something off at that distance.

Plus, Shin Ruu was speedier than even Rau Lea. He might have been a step short of Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu, but a hunter his age definitely should have packed a pretty strong punch, too.

With that in mind, I shot Shin Ruu a sideways glance... but though his eyes

were blazing bright, there was a cold sweat clinging to his forehead and cheeks.

No good, huh...?

When I followed Shin Ruu's gaze, I found that man who seemed to be from Sym standing there. He was casually holding his knife, and showed no signs of being intimidated by the intense pressure Shin Ruu was exuding as a hunter.

It... sort of looks like Shin Ruu's the one being overwhelmed, somehow...

However, it didn't make any sense for that to be the case when we were talking about someone from town facing off with a hunter from the forest's edge. Apparently even bodyguards like Zasshuma and swordsmen like Labis didn't come close to measuring up. Only a handful of folks in town could match —

As that thought hit me, a chill ran down my spine.

It couldn't be...

I shook my head, thinking there was just no way.

"Come here, Asuta of the Fa clan. If you're nice and obedient, that will settle things," the one man said, his voice sounding ever so slightly irritated.

The man from Sym, meanwhile, remained silent and unmoving.

"Will you really let him go...? Here and now?"

"You certainly are tedious. Just hurry up and do it."

"Alright..." I replied, moving to step forward.

Instantly, Shin Ruu whispered, "You can't... Don't approach those men. We can't afford to lose you, Asuta."

"Yeah, but... I'm sorry. I can't just abandon Nail, either," I replied, the image of my beloved clan head floating up in my mind as I did so.

I'm sorry, Ai Fa. I swear I won't ever give up, all the way to the bitter end... But for now, this is all I can do.

There was no way I could just leave Nail to his fate.

And besides, he must have seen the villains' faces.

Since we had hunters from the forest's edge watching the front and back entrances, I had no doubt: These must have been the two who were up on the second floor, pretending to be customers.

In that case, Nail's testimony should be able to pin them as the criminals. There's gotta be a chance to turn things around somehow.

Besides, I couldn't think of anything to do under the circumstances but obey. If these men really were too much for Shin Ruu to handle, then not just Nail but even Reina Ruu could be in danger here, too.

"Asuta..." she whispered, sounding about ready to cry.

After taking a single breath, I went ahead and stepped forward.

Shin Ruu twitched, only for the tall man to threaten him with his knife.

"Alright... Grab him."

The tall man gave a little nod, then took hold of me with his open right arm. He wasn't holding on all that strongly, but he instantly placed his knife up against my throat.

"That's enough, right? Let him go."

"Hmph..." the westerner snorted, letting Nail loose from his grip.

With that, the inn owner fell limply to the floor.

"Don't go making any unnecessary moves. Our employer really does just want to welcome you as a guest. As long as you listen and behave yourself, you should be able to return to your normal everyday life again tomorrow."

Those words really weren't persuasive in the least when I had a blade pressed against my throat.

As Shin Ruu's eyes burned away with chagrin, he growled, "You motherless bastards... If you put so much as a single scratch on Asuta, I will end you, even if it costs me my life."

The kidnappers offered no response.

However, the stout one reached into his cloak and pulled out some sort of scrap of cloth giving off an irritating smell.

“Don’t move,” he said as he held that cloth over my nose and mouth.

It was heavily soaked in something. I got a strange sense of déjà vu as a sweet aroma filled my nose and started fogging up my mind.

Melemele herbs...?

I suddenly recalled that nightmare from back at the Suun settlement.

But even that quickly grew cloudy, as my consciousness swiftly faded.

The last thing I recalled was the kidnapper holding me saying, “Asuta, you are not in, danger. Please, use your skill for the sake, of my employer.”

And when he did so, it was in Sanjura’s voice.

3

I dreamed, and in that dream, Ai Fa was crying. She was angry. She was laughing.

All sorts of Ai Fas showed me all sorts of expressions and then vanished. It was a dream that filled me with both sadness that could split me in half, and joy that could make me burst.

Ai Fa had stared at me with teary eyes. Shot me a chilly glare. Wrapped her arms around me with a warm look.

Stay by my side, forever.

When had that been, exactly?

Ai Fa hugged me close in the dark.

I swear I’ll stay with you my whole life, too.

I’d make that promise over and over, as many times as I had to.

As long as Ai Fa allowed it, and this very world itself didn’t reject me, I would remain with her.

I wouldn’t leave her side until my body gave out.

Until a god or devil or whatever decided to mess with my fate again and throw me back into those flames, I swore I would never be apart from her.

I don't want to lose anyone again...

On that day, I lost everything.

My old man and my childhood friend Reina, and the precious life I had built up with them was all gone thanks to my rash actions.

I couldn't bear the thought of feeling such despair again.

So Ai Fa...

Please, don't let go of this hand...

As the empty space around us wavered, I hugged Ai Fa tight. However, as I did so, her body scattered apart and vanished.

And then I woke up.



"Uugh...?"

When I came to, I found myself lying down and hugging my own body.

It had been such a vivid dream, but as it slipped away from my memory, it left behind nothing but a vague lingering sense of loneliness.

What in the world was I doing in a place like this...?

It was like there was a sort of white haze filling my mind, leaving my thoughts and emotions all murky.

When was it...? Where was I...?

And so, I tried to focus my hazy vision.

The first thing I saw was an unfamiliar plaster ceiling.

And what I was lying on was a bed. It had a thin, fluffy mattress like a futon that felt real pleasant on my back.

"Futon... Futon?!" I questioned, shooting up.

Instantly, I was struck by a powerful sense of vertigo and felt like I was about to faint.

It was a fact that I was atop a bed, and that there was a soft futon laid out

under me.

And it wasn't like the layered thick cloth I had seen at the forest's edge. No, it was an airy, high-class mattress that supported me gently like a dream.

A sense of terror was creeping in, slowly eating away at me.

There's just no way, I thought, stricken by the worry that I had been thrust once again into some new unfamiliar world.

As I wiped the cold sweat from my brow, I tried looking about my surroundings.

I really hadn't seen a room built like this one before after all.

The four walls were built with what looked to be white bricks with a yellowing tint, and there was a double door on the one to my right. There was a tall partitioning screen of some sort blocking my view in the other three directions, but from the size of the ceiling I assumed the room was around 13 square meters. Right next to the bed was a small wooden table with a vase on top, as well as a chair. And that was pretty much it in terms of furnishings.

However, that table and the bed I was sleeping on were adorned with subtle engravings, and in general seemed of high quality. And this fluffy futon had to be stuffed with down or something, plus the surface felt smooth like silk rather than regular cloth.

As for the folding screen blocking my view, it had an indigo-blue background and some sort of unfamiliar bird design embroidered using vibrant thread. It was showy like a peacock or a phoenix, and there were detailed fangs in its beak, making it look like some eerie cross between a bird and a reptile. I had no idea what it was, but regardless, something made with that much gorgeous detail must have cost a fortune.

And then, there was the thick rug spread out atop the floor. I didn't know if it was more Persian or Turkish in style, but it had a richly-colored, complex geometric pattern to it. That luxury stood out weirdly when put next to crudely-crafted brick walls.

It was a stately, extravagant room overall.

At the very least, it didn't seem to be any sort of jail.

However... I also wasn't familiar with this style of room, either.

"What is this place, exactly...?"

It was a brick-built room of a sort not seen in my old world, the settlement at the forest's edge, or the Genos post town.

I could feel the unease in me building more and more.

With that, I closed my eyes for a moment, gave my cloudy head a light jab, and then made up my mind and tried to get up.

And in the same moment, a voice called out, "Oh, my... You have awoken...?"

I could feel my heart almost leap out of my chest.

When I turned to face the direction the voice had come from, I found a figure casually appearing from beyond the partitioning screen.

"My apologies for failing to have realized... How are you feeling...?"

Her listless, slow way of speaking reminded me just a bit of Vina Ruu. However, naturally this wasn't her. This young woman was just about as much of a looker, though, and even taller.

Her skin was porcelain white, even paler than folks from Jagar.

As for her hair, it was a beautiful gold like honey, and spiraled all the way down to her hips. Her eyes were purple like amethyst. This was my first time seeing anyone but Kamyua Yoshu with eyes like that.

"I am the one tasked with assisting you, and my name is Chiffon Chel... You are Sir Asuta of the Fa clan, correct...?"

Asuta of the Fa clan... So I was still in a world where someone would use that name, huh?

I placed both hands on the soft bedding and breathed a hearty sigh of relief.

However, that wasn't all I was feeling. In this case, it meant I had been abducted by some real bastards.

The hazy feeling muddying my thoughts had to be an aftereffect of that drug

that was used to knock me out. It must have been some sort of extract made from melemele leaves, which induced sleep.

And as I recalled about Ai Fa, Shin Ruu, and Ludo Ruu with that murky head of mine, I started grinding my teeth. There was no time for being stricken with despair, though. After all, I was in the middle of the enemy camp.

“Are you alright...? If you are not feeling well, then it would be best to rest for a while—”

“No, I’m fine,” I replied, once more facing that girl who had introduced herself as Chiffon Chel.

She really was a beautiful woman. Her facial features were finely chiseled, with a sort of nordic look to them. However, her soft, slender chin gave her a look of elegance and grace.

And she was rather tall, too. In fact, she was probably taller than me. And that tall, curvy body of hers was wrapped in a long, loose white gown.

Plus, she had numerous accessories around her hair, limbs, and neck, so when combined with her golden hair and pale skin, she reminded me of a goddess out of Greek mythology.

How old was she, exactly? She was tall and had a relaxed air about her, but she also wore a somehow cherubic-looking expression.

“Um, where exactly am I? Is this... the Genos castle town?”

She had called me “Asuta of the Fa clan.” Combined with what I was seeing of this room, I couldn’t think of any other answer.

The Genos castle town... The heart of Genos surrounded by thick walls, where only nobles and those they recognized were allowed to come and go.

At that, Chiffon Chel placed her hand over her mouth and giggled.

“My... You weren’t even informed of that much, Sir Asuta...? Still, my apologies. I am not permitted to divulge anything unnecessarily...”

“Then could you call for someone reasonable for me to speak with? I was threatened with knives and brought here against my will, you know.”

“I see... Well then, allow me to lead you downstairs...” Chiffon Chel replied, slowly approaching me.

I braced myself without thinking, but she actually stopped at the table rather than the bed.

Her fingers, pale as icefish, reached down and picked up a silver object from behind the vase. From what I could tell, it looked to be a delicately-adorned handbell. With it she let out a light jingle, and in response the doors to the room opened from the outside.

“Sir Asuta of the Fa clan has awoken... I wish to guide him downstairs...”

There were two soldiers standing outside the doors. Both of them had medium builds, and from what I could tell they looked to be westerners. It wasn't to the extent of the ducal guard, but their leather armor was noticeably decorated, and they wore narrow longswords at their hips. At the very least, these seemed to be different men than the thugs who kidnapped me.

Sanjura... Was that really you...?

Just before my consciousness cut off I heard his voice, but it wasn't ever clear to me if that was a dream or not. But that kidnapper was tall and dark skinned, strong enough to overwhelm even Shin Ruu... and he held his knife in his left hand. Sanjura, meanwhile, had injured his right arm.

But why would Sanjura do something like that...? Was he really the sort to take part in such a crooked plot?

Naturally, the answers to those questions remained a mystery.

However, I couldn't imagine that plot working out without properly grasping the relationship between me and Nail. I mean, we were talking using a mere business acquaintance as a hostage to get me to do what they wanted. You would need to know a decent bit about our characters in order to know that would work.

And Sanjura was both a regular at my stall and had been staying at The Sledgehammer. In that case, it would be easy for him to sense that Nail was a supporter of the people of the forest's edge, as well as how someone like me would deal with him.

The more I thought on the matter, the tighter the sensation in my chest grew. I had been torn away from my comrades at the forest's edge and my old man's precious knife, left with nothing but the clothes on my back in a place like this. And on top of that, it seemed I had been acting out a one-sided friendship only to find myself stabbed in the back.

"Well then, let us be off..." Chiffon Chel stated, gracefully swaying toward the soldiers.

And as I held back the various emotions welling up inside of me, I followed after.

Beyond the door stretched a hallway. Sure enough, the walls were made of brick, while a rug was laid out atop the floor. The ceiling was high, but the passage wasn't actually all that wide. And the only light source was some small windows set up high, so it was pretty dim.

We walked just ten meters down the hall with soldiers in front of and behind us, and then a stone spiral staircase came into view.

Once we made it downstairs, we stepped into another hallway no better than the last. The place really did have a suffocating feel to it.

"This way..." Chiffon Chel stated, gesturing toward a notably larger door.

One of the soldiers silently pushed it open, only for a lukewarm air to cling to me.

What is this room?

It was a room without any noteworthy furnishings, seriously looking like a jail cell. And the bricks or stone or whatever were bare under my feet, too.

However there was another large door further in, so it must have been an antechamber or something.

So the mastermind behind those ridiculous orders is on the other side, huh?

I couldn't imagine anyone but Cyclaeus doing such a thing. However, I had heard that the nobles in charge of politics were supposed to be stuck in the castle starting today. I certainly didn't think this was the heart of the castle itself, but still... Just what exactly was the truth here, anyway?

“Please, come along...” Chiffon Chel said, stepping forward without any hesitation.

The soldiers, meanwhile, stopped on either side of the inner door.

And when Chiffon Chel went ahead and pulled the door open, an abnormal amount of heat and moisture came flowing forth.

“Gyah!” I shouted without thinking, only for cold fingers to grab hold of my wrist.

“Now then, hurry along. The heat will end up escaping, otherwise...”

“Wh-What is this room?”

She had closed the door tight behind us, and we now stood in a room filled to the brim with white steam.

I couldn’t even tell the room’s depth. That was just how thick the steam was.

And also... I could detect a faint whiff of herbs. It was a different smell than lilo, pico, or melemele, and was instead something closer to mugwort. It really wasn’t an unpleasant aroma at all, but still, it put me seriously on guard.

“Is something the matter...?” Chiffon Chel questioned, smiling from beyond the white haze.

With that, her hand circled around to her back, and her white gown slid down to her feet. And so, her naked body even whiter than the steam was now fully exposed before my eyes.

“Wh-Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!”

“I am unsure how to answer that... I was ordered to help with dressing you after all, Sir Asuta...” she replied, now removing the accessories from her limbs. I could just barely make out that she at least seemed to have something like a loincloth around her hips.

However, aside from that, she was stark naked. If it weren’t for the steam being so thick, I probably would have been panicking twice as much as I was now.

“Now then, Sir Asuta, your attire, please...”

Her white, supple arms stretched out toward me like twin snakes.

“Uwaah!” I wailed, my back now up against the closed door.

“B-By dressing, you mean... Is this a bath?!”

“A bath...? Well, it is a bathhouse...”

It turned out my hunch had hit the mark. I was vaguely aware that even back in Japan, steam baths were commonplace instead of bathtubs all the way up to the Edo era. Of course, that response didn’t put me any more at ease.

“At any rate, we must start by cleansing your body. Now then, your attire, please...”

“I-I get that this room is for bathing! And if I have to clean myself, then I’ll do so! But I seriously don’t need any help!”

“Oh, my... But if I do not carry out my duty, then I will be whipped...”

“Duty? This is a duty for you?!”

“Yes... Entertaining guests is the reason for living granted to me...” Chiffon Chel said with a faint smile as she approached me.

She really did seem to be five centimeters or so taller than me.

“I am especially good at scrubbing, so you have nothing to worry about.” Those icefish-like fingers wormed their way under my t-shirt. “Oh, my... Sir Asuta, you have such smooth skin, like a woman’s... It certainly seems like it will be satisfying to polish up...”

I ended up shrieking from the depths of my soul for someone to save me. However, that did nothing but churn about the steam in the bathhouse, and ultimately no help ever came.



Approximately 20 minutes had passed.

I felt like some of my dignity as a human being had been scrubbed away with the filth as I collapsed in the antechamber where the guards were waiting.

“Have you still not fully resuscitated after all...?” Chiffon Chel asked in a concerned tone, peeking out. I had intended to tell her that wasn’t it, but I

wasn't able to form the words.

I had also been forced to wear fresh clothing that had been prepared while I was in the bathhouse. The outfit consisted of a milky white sleeveless vest, and some loose clothing that reminded me of harem pants. The whole ensemble was white from top to bottom, with only the leather shoes standing out by being camel colored instead.

"Well then, shall we be off...? The sun seems to have gone down quite a bit, after all..."

"Ah, hold on. What are you planning on doing with my clothes?"

What I previously had on was now balled up like trash in a woven basket.

"Yes, well, if it is alright, I was intending to dispose of them for you..."

"That'd be an issue. They're all very precious to me, after all," I said, pulling the tusk and horn necklace out of the basket and putting it on. "Please make sure not to get rid of any of the rest, either. I'd like to change back into that outfit again when leaving," I managed to get out a bit forcefully, only for Chiffon Chel to break out in an amused smile.

"Very well... I will assist you again when that time comes..."

"No thank you!" I wailed, rising to my feet.

"Well then, let us be off..."

With that, we met back up with the soldiers and once again started walking down the hallway. And this time, we ignored the spiral staircase and kept on heading straight instead.

Though we ended up making numerous turns as we went, we just weren't coming to an open space. Not only did the place make me feel like I was locked up just by being there, it also seemed to be built a bit like a labyrinth.

"This is it..." Chiffon Chel stated, stopping before another door.

So this was finally going to be my confrontation with the despicable mastermind, huh?

Kidnapping someone at knifepoint and then making them bathe before even

meeting them sure sounded like the sort of ridiculous thing a noble would do. The first thing I had to do was try to get them to consider peacefully returning me to the post town, but I had some serious doubts as to whether or not I'd be able to hold back the defiant rage brewing inside of me.

Even so, I absolutely couldn't lose my temper. No matter what, I needed to overcome this dilemma and make it back to Ai Fa.

As those thoughts ran through my head, I stepped through the door... only to feel seriously let down.

I suppose I really should have expected a development like this. Rather than an audience chamber with a haughty noble, it was something I was much more familiar with... A kitchen.

"Now then, this is the place where you will be working, Sir Asuta..."

So their reasoning for abducting a chef like me was to have me cook for them after all, huh? Now that I thought about it, that kidnapper I figured had to be Sanjura had said something like, "Please use your skill for the sake of my employer." Still, it was absolutely ridiculous to ask me to cook before even explaining what was going on.

"What's the deal here, exactly? I'd like an explanation," I questioned in a firm tone despite being extremely curious about the kitchen.

The soldiers were still standing by outside and showed no signs of entering the room, so the one to answer cheerfully was of course Chiffon Chel.

"Our employer desires your cooking, Sir Asuta... Please ask Sir Roy for more details if you wish..."

"Roy? Who is that?"

"He is one of the chefs of this palace, and he will be assisting you... Are you there, Sir Roy..." Chiffon Chel called out, raising her voice a little.

"Yeah, yeah," a voice roughly answered from the half-opened door on the other side of the kitchen. "So he's finally here, huh? I've got my own work to handle, you know, so this really is a pain," the voice grumbled as a single young man emerged.

He looked to be about 20 or so and was a westerner. On his head he wore a cylindrical hat, and he had on the same sort of white outfit I did. Yup, he certainly looked the part of a chef.

Dark brown hair spilled out from under his hat, and his skin was lightly freckled. As for his height and build, they weren't all that different from my own, so he certainly was far from burly.

"Hmph, so you're today's last-moment arrival, eh?"

His light brown eyes showed some serious doubt as they started inspecting me up and down. His face had the gentle look of a young man with a good upbringing, but right now, he appeared rather frustrated.

"Well, whatever. Just hurry up and get started already. I can't get to work on my own tasks till we're done with yours."

"Hold on a moment. I was kidnapped against my will, you know? You've got to be joking, suddenly going and telling me to cook after something like that," I objected, only for Roy to turn and shoot Chiffon Chel an annoyed look.

"Hey, you didn't tell him anything at all? All I was ordered to do was help him cook."

"My apologies, Sir Roy... Um, Sir Asuta, I was informed that you were told the details of your task..."

"I wasn't told anything. Like I said before, I was threatened with a knife and dragged here."

Neither Chiffon Chel or Roy here seemed the types to support such wrongdoing, so I tried making that assertion.

However, Chiffon Chel just politely smiled, while Roy disinterestedly turned away. Apparently even if they didn't approve of such actions, they also didn't sympathize with my circumstances.

"Well then, allow me to explain... Our employer desires your cooking, Sir Asuta. If what you make proves satisfactory, then you will be rewarded... This is what I was told."

"And... if I were to refuse?"

“That... would most likely result in a whipping.”

“Something that outrageous is seriously allowed here in Genos?” I flared up without thinking.

“No...” Chiffon Chel replied with a listless shake of her head. “I would be the one to be whipped... Our employer would surely view such a result as coming from some blunder on my part, after all...”

“What the heck. There’s no logic to hitting you at all.”

“Our employer needs no reason in order to hit me...”

With those words, I had the answer to a question that had been building in the back of my mind.

“You said your name is Chiffon Chel, right? I apologize if I’m wrong, but... are you perhaps from Mahyudra?”

With that, Chiffon Chel gave another amused giggle.

“I am not supposed to speak out of turn, but do I really look like anything but a northerner...?”

I knew it, I thought with a sigh. In the Western Kingdom of Selva, people of the enemy nation of Mahyudra were employed as slaves.

In that case, this really was Cyclaeus’s manor. After all, Kamyua Yoshu had once said that twisted noble was the only one who would buy slaves here in Genos, so far from the border with Mahyudra.

Seriously, just how repulsive can one man be, damn it?

As that girl in those awful circumstances just scratched at her pretty head, I turned to face her once again.

“Well then, if I make some food, I’ll be returned home properly? I believe the men who kidnapped me said something to that effect.”

“Yes... However, you must not hold back when carrying out your work. I am told that if what you present is unsatisfactory, you will be forbidden from doing business in the post town...”

“That doesn’t make any damn sense at all! Um... just to confirm, this is the

manor of Count Cyclaeus Turan, isn't it?"

I got no response.

Chiffon Chel smiled like she was soothing a child, while Roy gave an affected shrug of his shoulders.

"Looking at the circumstances, I figure that has to be the case. I mean, this couldn't be Duke Marstein Genos's castle, right...?"

In response, I got back a ridiculing snort and a, "Ha! Genos castle? What are you, stupid? I don't know if you're from the forest's edge or the post town or whatever, but do you really think someone like you would be allowed in a place like that?"

"If I'm wrong, then that's fine. But Count Turan should be busy in the castle starting from today on, right? So I don't get how exactly I ended up in these circumstances."

"Sir Asuta... I am terribly sorry, but we are only permitted to say so much..."

"So I really will need to cook without even getting to know who's behind this whole farce? And if they're satisfied I'll get a reward, while if they're not they'll crush my business in the post town?"

"No... The matter of your business relates to a desire to have you give your full effort, from what I was told. As long as your cooking is not excessively poor, I believe you shall not be met with such punishment..."

"But it comes down to the tastes of the person eating a dish to determine how they rate it, right?"

"Yes..." Chiffon Chel replied with a troubled looking tilt of her head.

"However, all our employer desires is delicious food... It has nothing to do with you personally, Sir Asuta, and in fact you were invited to this manor in recognition of your skill. So there should be no need for you to worry..."

"So regardless of whether my cooking's to their tastes or not, they'll let me go home once that's done with? And as long as it's not especially awful, they won't interfere with my business in the post town?"

"Yes... Or at least, I was told as much..."

“If those words are true, then that does a lot to put my mind at ease.”

However, I couldn't exactly put much faith in the honesty of someone who wouldn't even show me their face. And that went even more so for someone who had me abducted by force.

Still... What exactly was the deal with these circumstances? It was true that I'd heard Cyclaeus was a famed gourmand, but would he really try something like this when we were in the middle of trying to expose his old crimes?

Perhaps it was only obvious he'd find someone like me an unacceptable interloper, seeing as I was a foreigner who called himself a person of the forest's edge and had started doing business in the post town. But I guess if he had such culinary interests, he could have ended up taking note of my skill.

Why now, though? Having bandits dress as hunters of the forest's edge and attack plantations, going after Milano Mas's daughter, and suddenly getting guards to start advocating for us... Compared to all those various plots, this one just felt far too sloppy.

Actually, “sloppy” probably wasn't enough to cover openly abducting me at knife point in the middle of the day and bringing me back to his own home. Between my testimony and Nail's, we should be able to properly charge him with this crime. And considering Melfried had no less authority than Cyclaeus did, we would definitely be able to avoid having this all swept under the rug by bringing it up with him.

Was Cyclaeus really enough of a fool to commit such a stupid crime when he was already under pressure?

Plus, if all he wanted was a single night's dinner, why not just tell that to the leading clan heads? He was clearly in a higher position, and if he just accepted the condition of letting us bring guards, they probably wouldn't be able to stubbornly refuse.

It seemed almost certain that Cyclaeus was involved in this plot somehow, but I couldn't help but feel something was out of place here.

“Hey, in that case why not just withdraw to your room? I'd seriously appreciate it too, as it'd mean less pointless work for me,” Roy chimed in, his

voice dripping with irritation.

I went ahead and gave the thought some serious consideration.

Mikel had warned that I absolutely shouldn't show my skills to Cyclaeus, no matter what. I had no guarantee that wicked noble was behind all this, but would it be wisest to just hole up in that brick room, at least until five days passed and Melfried was free to act again?

"No, Sir Asuta. I do not wish to say such things, but... I believe an action such as that would prove dangerous..."

"Dangerous?"

"Yes... Today our employer is in a very good mood at the thought of having a long held desire fulfilled. But if you were to upset them with your actions, then you could very well be the one who ends up getting whipped..."

"Hey, if you go speaking out of turn, then *you'll* get whipped, right?" Roy sneered with contempt.

The revulsion I had been suppressing was now boiling back up in the pit of my stomach.

"Got it. At any rate, I've just got to cook, huh?"

In for a penny, in for a pound, I guess.

The other side had my fate in the palm of their hands, anyway.

I believed that the best choice was to meet this head on, trusting that Kamyua Yoshu's plotting and the leading clan heads' efforts would eventually take Cyclaeus down. Even if he grew fixated on my cooking, if he fell from power it ultimately wouldn't matter.

Besides... I don't think I could stand five whole days apart from Ai Fa.

Plus my clan head would have to spend that time not even knowing where I was taken. Just imagining inflicting that pain and loneliness upon her was enough to cause my heart to break.

I'll make it back home, no matter what it takes.

And so, I ended up cooking food for a noble in their manor.

Chapter 2: A Childish Tyrant

1

“Well then, excuse me...” Chiffon Chel stated as she exited the kitchen, leaving just me and Roy.

“Good grief. If you’d just leave too, that’d spare me a lot of trouble,” Roy grumbled.

However, I was focused on taking in the state of the kitchen at the moment. If it weren’t for the circumstances, I would have been positively overjoyed to find myself in a place like this. Whoever owned this manor, it had to be either a noble or one of their followers. And so, this kitchen was far better equipped than any I had seen at the forest’s edge or the post town.

To start with, each wall had to be around 6-7 meters wide. It was a large enough size that you could definitely fit two ten-square-meter rooms inside. Both the walls and floors were lined with bricks, and there were numerous open windows high up to provide both light and ventilation, which seemed to be doing a solid job.

On the right hand wall, there was all sorts of cookware dangling in a row. Naturally that included a variety of knives, but also ladles and wooden spatulas both big and small, a metallic grater, something like a strainer for sifting and draining, and so on. It looked every bit as well equipped as a kitchen from back home.

Farther in sat a large shelf, and that had all shapes and sizes of pots and bowls. I saw a flat one with a handle that looked like a frying pan, and even something akin to a mortar.

Opposite from that were the stoves. Four of them in total, of various sizes, all precisely constructed out of stone. Beside them was a box stuffed with firewood, and some pitch black little shapes... Charcoal. I ended up face to face with the stuff before I got the chance to ask Mikel more about it.

Continuing down the line, I found a huge metal box. It was half-embedded in the wall, and there was a square door on the front. *Could it be...?* I thought as I went ahead and pulled it open, to find two flat racks of metal wire spanning the inside. Sure enough, it was an oven.

Then there was the spacious work table installed in the center of the room. Plus, there were plenty of jugs filled with water, too. The other separate large jar must have been a wastebasket. It had been washed clean, but it had just a bit of a rotten meat smell lingering about it.

It was all so perfect. Taking into account that there was no gas or electricity here in this world, it was about as well equipped of a kitchen as I could imagine. Even though things felt so antiquated in this world, it was still possible to make all this.

I had very mixed feelings, both admiration at the setup, but also concern at the gap between how nobles and commoners lived.

“I was told to have you make a single main dish,” Roy said with a faint grin, so I turned to face his way. “And you should use kimyuus meat and karon milk. The pantry’s over here,” he added, gesturing toward the door on the far side of the room, where he had been till we arrived.

And there, I found yet another dazzling paradise awaiting me. There were countless evenly-spaced shelves, all positively packed with vegetables, both familiar and otherwise.

There were dried fruits and herbs on the walls, and the farthest shelf in was full of earthenware and glass jars. The massive one at my feet had a lid covering it, so that naturally must have been where the meat was buried, pickling in salt.

Immediately beside that sat a woven basket with two varieties of eggs, large and small. The smaller ones likely came from the chicken-like kimyuus, while the big ones were probably from totos, which was more like a giant moa from my old world. Eggs didn’t show up too commonly in the stalls, and you generally had to go to a kimyuus or totos dealer directly in order to purchase them, so that made for a pretty rare sight for me, too.

“This sure is something... Everything is on a whole different scale when you’re talking about a noble’s manor, huh?”

“Hmph. Just to clarify, this is only the kitchen meant for the servants, you know.”

“Servants?”

“It’s a small kitchen meant for preparing food for the folks who work here. Fitting for a kid like you, right?”

That certainly was true. If I was granted even more, it would be far too much for someone like me. And so, I really didn’t feel all that angry even when Roy shot me that scornful look.

“Anyway, hurry up and get started. The bell for the third hour has already rung, so if you take your sweet time you won’t finish before dinner.”

“The third hour... I was kidnapped just a bit after the sun hit its peak, so around how much time do I have left?”

“Dinner is when the sun sets, at the sixth hour.”

“Got it. So is it the zero hour when the sun hits its peak? Or the first?”

“That’s just the sun hitting its peak. And when the bell chimes six times after that, it’s sunset.”

Roy looked astounded, like he was thinking, *You don’t even know that much?*

So if they split the time between the sun hitting its peak and when it sets into six parts, that’d put us right in the middle of the afternoon, huh?

In other words, it was around when our stalls wrapped up business for the day back in the post town.

What was everyone doing now that I had been snatched away? Such thoughts were pressing in on me even now.

Did Ludo Ruu and the other hunters get hurt?

Was Nail released like they said?

Did Reina Ruu and the other women keep running the stalls all the way till the end of the day?

I guess I ended up completely failing to show up for my business with the inns, too. What did Nail, Naudis, and Milano Mas think when they heard how I

was abducted?

And Ai Fa... Had Ai Fa already been told what had happened?

I'm definitely coming home, safe and sound.

With that, I resolutely turned and faced Roy.

"Which one is the karon milk?"

Roy silently walked over toward the innermost shelf. Then, he grabbed an earthenware jar around the size of a container of fruit wine.

"These blue jars are all karon milk. There are five left for today."

I popped off the cork-like lid and gave the contents a whiff. A thick, milky aroma came flooding into my nose.

"What a wonderful scent. Can I just drink it as is?"

"Of course. If there's any left over for tomorrow, it'll just get made into milk fat or dried milk."

"Milk fat?"

I was just as unfamiliar with the term as I had been "dried milk."

However, a certain premonition came to mind.

"I take it that just means it's made from the fats in the milk? In that case, could it be..."

I started, only for Roy to cut me off with an annoyed shake of his hand. He picked up a small jar from the shelf, and underneath its lid awaited a gleaming, cream-colored, fragrant substance... Yes, this was undoubtedly some sort of butter.

"Ooh, this is amazing! What's in these other jars and containers?"

"This one has reten oil, and this is karon fat. That next shelf down has mamaria fruit wine, sparkling wine from Jagar, gyama dried milk from Sym, and vinegar made from mamaria."

"Vinegar! There's vinegar, too?!" I shouted without thinking, only for Roy to furrow his brow in annoyance.

“Mamaria vinegar isn’t especially rare, is it? It’s nothing to go being so ridiculously loud over, at least.”

“I’ve never seen vinegar in the post town before. As for that reten oil, is it derived from a vegetable?”

Roy’s face said, “Of course it is.”

I only knew of the state of the post town, while he seemed to solely be aware of how things were in the castle town. And so, he obviously couldn’t understand my surprise at this milk fat, vegetable oil, and vinegar. Between my unease at being wrenched away from my comrades at the forest’s edge and excitement at encountering these new ingredients, I was practically in a drunken frenzy of sorts.

“This row here is ingredients from Jagar. Tau oil, sugar, and panam honey.”

The Jagar-produced sugar was a light brown color and looked just a bit coarse.

As for the panam honey, it was a slick golden liquid that reminded me of maple syrup.

There was also the familiar rock salt, as well as various herbs and spices like pico and lilo. And there were plenty of crisp, dried red chitt seeds stored there too.

As for dried milk, there were two varieties: gyama and karon. Based on my experience, the gyama dried milk was rich like Camembert cheese, while the karon stuff was milkier and had a soft, springy texture. When adding in the pure white color like snow, it seemed to be something akin to high-grade mozzarella cheese.

The last ingredient to make an appearance was a light yellow mysterious powder.

“That powder’s a stock made from kimyuus bone, karon shoulder meat, and a variety of vegetables all boiled together.”

With Roy’s permission, I took a pinch and gave it a lick.

Instantly, a delicious saltiness exploded forth atop my tongue. It was a condensed flavor that reminded me of bouillon.

“Wow. How do you solidify the boiled stock like this?”

I had thought this sort of trick wasn't possible without freeze drying, but Roy plainly responded, “Once the stock is separated, we add coarsely ground fuwano powder and salt, then dry it out.”

In that case, this was powdered fuwano that had absorbed the stock, huh?

From what I knew, fuwano was an ingredient like wheat flour that was also eaten in the post town. But since the people of the forest's edge ate poitan as a staple instead, I had only had a chance to taste it a handful of times.

“Those are the seasonings we've got here in this kitchen. Do you find that somehow unsatisfactory, Mr. Post Town Chef?”

“Of course not.”

Milk and milk fat, vegetable oil, animal oil, vinegar, sugar, honey, bouillon... It was an absolute cavalcade of the seasonings I had been so craving. So much so that it was upending how I looked at everything I've struggled with all this time.

However, this wasn't my normal work. No, my true task was to see how many dishes I could conjure up with the limited ingredients and seasonings available in the post town. As my bewilderment abated, I felt myself getting more and more angry in turn.

Is there seriously such a gap between how things are inside and outside of the stone walls? The people of the forest's edge protect the fields from giba, the plantation owners grow crops in their fields, and the folks from the post town do business with travelers... But what exactly do the people in the castle town do to earn such luxury?

To start with, I had been born in the nation of Japan. I didn't know anything more about feudal societies ruled by nobles and royals than what I had learned in school. From my perspective, having such a massive gap between how nobles and commoners lived wasn't something I could just shrug off and accept.

“So, you said to use karon milk and kimyuus meat, right? What sort of dish would you normally make with those?” I asked Roy, suppressing the irritation I was feeling inside.

“Generally you would use karon milk in a boiled dish or stew, or pair it with grilled meat. At any rate, you need to combine it with other seasonings to make it into a proper meal.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Hmm... Guess I should go with cream stew here...”

“Cream stew?”

“It’s a dish from my home country. Hopefully it’ll meet your noble employer’s tastes.”

Whether it did or not, though, I had no choice but to pull from the repertoire of dishes that I knew.

And so, I started by giving the karon milk and milk fat a taste test.

“Hey, if you’re checking out the taste of the milk, give the container a shake.”

“Huh? Why’s that?”

“If you don’t, the water and oil won’t mix.”

Ah, right. When raw, unprocessed milk was left to sit, the liquid and fat would end up separating.

And so, I followed Roy’s advice and gave the container a good shake before giving the karon milk a taste. It was more viscous than the milk I knew, and had a real rich flavor to it.

It didn’t have a questionable odor about it like I had been expecting, either. Did that mean that it had been pasteurized? At any rate, with that richness it definitely must have had a higher fat content than cow’s milk.

And extracting all that was how they got what they called milk fat. They didn’t seem to have fermented it or anything like that, and the sweetness and flavor was pretty close to the butter I knew.

However, they had added rock salt, presumably to preserve it. I could detect that pretty easily, and thanks to the high air temperature, it was in a half-melted state. In all likelihood, it wouldn’t have all that long of a shelf life.

Still, if these ingredients could act as substitutes for milk and butter, it wouldn’t be hard at all to make a sort of cream stew. And so, though I had a lot

of different emotions swirling around inside me about all this, I went ahead and picked out my vegetables as calmly as I could manage.

“By the way, how many people should I prepare for?”

“Four... No wait, three.”

Three, huh?

And just who would those people be, exactly?

Now that I thought about it, Diel and her father were supposed to be staying at one of Cyclaeus’s manors, but was this the place? I found it hard to imagine you would bring guests to the same place as someone you kidnapped, but I couldn’t claim to understand how nobles thought.

“If we’re talking a single plate for three people, that’s not all that much. I don’t think I should need any help from you for the actual cooking in that case.”

“Yeah, yeah, just do as you please,” Roy replied, actually grinning rather than looking annoyed. Maybe his “help” was just an excuse, and his actual task was to keep an eye on me.

Well, at any rate, there were already two armed guards outside the door. And so, as I headed over to the vegetable shelf, I figured that if they wanted to observe me they could do so, as much as they pleased.

I found the aria and chatchi right away. And I also secured one more vegetable sold in the post town, nenon.

Nenon was an orange, turnip-shaped vegetable. It had a mild sweetness to it, and got very soft when you boiled it. It was the source of the vegetable paste used in the kimyuus manju I had eaten as my first ever snack in the post town.

By boiling it to a suitable degree, I could get a texture akin to carrots. They didn’t have quite as much presence as those more familiar vegetables, but I had been occasionally using them to add a touch of color to our giba soup at the Fa house.

It would be perfect if I could find something like broccoli too, but there’s not exactly time to test out unfamiliar vegetables right now.

And so, I ended up choosing tino to provide some green in the dish. It was a

lot like cabbage, and had a rather strong color to it. I figured in a cream stew it wouldn't be half bad.

That was plenty in terms of vegetables.

However, I was still missing a crucial ingredient: the poitan to give the stew its thickness.

When I asked, I got back a sneer of, "Of course there isn't any. Do you really think you can make a proper dish with poitan of all things? Seriously, do you want to be whipped that badly?"

Right. Kamyua Yoshu had said that poitan was ultimately just seen as portable rations for travelers and soldiers, and didn't even make it to dinner tables in the post town.

As I loaded a variety of vegetables into a basket, I was left at something of a loss. A stew that wasn't thick really wasn't a stew at all.

"Umm... Then there's something I wanted to ask. You mentioned fuwano flour before, right? Fuwano's eaten as a staple food here in the castle town too, right?"

"Of course it is."

"Well then, what process do you use to get it like that, exactly?"

"Huh? You finely grind the fuwano, then knead it with water, naturally. You call yourself a chef, but you've never even baked fuwano?"

"Yes, because I haven't needed to before now. Then there should be some of that finely ground fuwano here, right?"

Rather than bothering with opening his mouth again, Roy just pointed to the corner of the pantry.

In the shadow of the vegetable shelf sat a large, but unassuming bag. And sure enough, when I opened it up I found it was packed with a white flour.

While poitan had a slightly creamy color, this stuff was pure white, like snow. Its grain was super fine, and when I gave a pinch of it a lick, I found it had a fluffy, wheaty flavor to it, like the flour I was more familiar with from my old world.

Yeah, this seems like it'll work... In fact, it may be even closer to wheat flour than poitan.

In that case, when added alongside my milk and butter substitutes, it should be easy to make up a white sauce like normal. So of course, I had to start by confirming that.

“Alright, I’ll be borrowing a stove, then.”

With that, I carried all my necessary ingredients into the kitchen and stood before the stove.

I lit a flame, placed a small pot above it, threw in some milk fat, and watched as it melted in no time at all. The aroma it gave off was a lot like butter, and it was seriously stirring up my appetite.

Then I added in the fuwano flour bit by bit, stirring it carefully so that it didn’t lump up.

With poitan, it would quickly burn when I tried this. And I had been using giba fat rather than milk fat back then, too. Because of that, when I made a stew back during the Rutim banquet, I had to add raw poitan in order to force it to take the appropriate thickness for the dish.

As I had expected, the fuwano flour and karon milk fat really did harmonize well.

Once it had become a viscous, half-liquid roux, I added some karon milk and gave it a taste. Both the flavor and the texture were pleasantly mild. While it was a richer flavor than a sauce made with milk and butter, it also didn’t have as strong of an aftertaste to it.

And when I added rock salt, pico leaves, and some of that pseudo-bouillon to adjust the flavor, it ended up as a nice white sauce I’d have no qualms about serving anywhere.

“Those are some pretty unusual preparations, there,” Roy sneered, but since he wasn’t directly asking for a taste I just went ahead and ignored him.



Alright, next up is the meat and veggies.

Aria, chatchi, tino, nenon... They would be acting as onions, potatoes, cabbage, and carrots in my dish. For the chatchi and tino, I went with bite-sized morsels, while I cut the aria into wedges and the nenon into half-moon slices. And since we were just talking enough for three people, I didn't need to make all that much.

For the kimyuus, I went ahead and settled on breast meat. And since it was apparently an entree I was preparing, I made it a pretty good helping. This manor fortunately had kimyuus meat with the skin still attached. I had heard it was significantly more expensive that way, but apparently that was no concern at all for a noble.

Cutting with their meat and vegetable knives felt fantastic, too. It really was ironic how blessed this environment felt.

"Um, is it alright if I use milk fat when frying meat and vegetables, too?"

"Huh? Just do as you please. You don't have to go asking me about every little thing."

"But it's a valuable ingredient, isn't it? You need a lot of milk to make just a little of it, right?"

I had heard that when making butter from milk, you only got 20 grams from each liter.

But Roy just gave back a sneer of, "Hmph. That may be true, but this manor buys so much milk we could never drink it all, and the extra's made into milk fat. No matter how crude a dish you make with it, it's at least better than letting it go bad, right?"

"You're talking about extra and having it go bad... You're not saying you throw the stuff out, are you?"

"What else would we do with it? Rub it on our skins like the high-ranking ladies in the capital do? Anyway, it's customary for nobles to just buy too much rather than risk having too little."

That custom was a crock of shit. Karon milk, milk fat, and dried milk were all

ingredients you couldn't even get a hold of in the post town. It would be one thing if they were just too costly to produce... But when the nobles were recklessly overbuying the stuff, that just unnecessarily drove up the prices.

Now that I think about it, you're only supposed to be able to buy karon torso meat in the castle town, too.

This was seriously pissing me off.

No matter how fantastic of a cream stew I might make, it felt completely hollow when I thought of how it would only ever get eaten by nobles.

Couldn't I at least get a hold of karon milk in the post town somehow? If we could make our own milk fat and dried milk from it, that would seriously increase the breadth of my cooking.

If you had the connections, it was at least possible to get gyama dried milk and tau oil through merchants. By looking into the distribution channels and having the funds, maybe it would be possible to purchase stuff like this karon milk, reten oil, and Jagar-made sugar in the post town, too. Or at least, I couldn't help but hope that was the case.

"Hey, if you keep dawdling like that, you really won't make it in time," Roy called out in a teasing tone, and I turned to face him.

He really was a perfectly ordinary-looking young westerner. He had a mouth on him, but I didn't think he was all that much of a villain. However, he also didn't seem to realize in the least just how blessed he was working in an environment like this.

"Let me use the stove again..."

Anyway, for now I just needed to hurry up and finish this job, even if I hadn't taken it of my own volition. Thinking about the forest's edge and the post town would have to wait. Still, I definitely felt I needed to at least bring back some helpful information after being forced through this insanity.

Holding on to that thought, I went ahead and fried up the chunks of kimyuus breast meat in milk fat. It had been pickled in salt to start with, and so I only used pico leaves for seasoning.

Once the surface of the meat turned a golden brown, I went ahead and threw in the vegetables, too. Then once those were nice and cooked, I added water and let it boil over a low flame.

30 minutes or so after, around when I heard a solemn distant bell ring out four times, even the chatchi (which cooked slowest) was plenty soft.

It wasn't like I was using giba meat, plus I had a bouillon substitute at hand, so I didn't need to boil it quite so thoroughly. And so, I went ahead and poured the milky white sauce I had made earlier into the pot.

After that, I carefully stirred it over a low flame, and once it was properly heated I gave it a taste.

It seemed a little lacking in salt, so I added a pinch, as well as some tau oil as a secret ingredient.

What a truly nostalgic cream stew flavor. It was a dish I had honestly never thought I would be able to make here in this world.

Just how overjoyed would I be feeling right now if I was feeding it to Ai Fa, the people of the forest's edge, and the folks from the post town instead? At any rate, I desperately held back those feelings as I told Roy, "It's done."

"Hmph. That was surprisingly quick... Hey, the food's done!" Roy yelled, at which point Chiffon Chel entered through the previously shut door.

"Good work, Sir Asuta, Sir Roy... Ah, what a wonderful karon milk aroma..." she stated as her eyes narrowed with excitement.

"Stop prattling on and do your job already," Roy retorted, snatching the plate for the sample of my dish out of my hands.

He ladled out some of the finished cream stew and thrust it toward Chiffon Chel. The woman then gave me a bow, and then accepted the wooden plate.

"Well then, I will now taste this dish for poison..."

So she even had to handle stuff like that?

I felt a deep gloom as I watched Chiffon Chel bring a spoonful of my stew to her mouth.

And then, with a, “My...” her eyes opened wide. And soon enough, she broke out in a faint smile full of both surprise and admiration. “What a truly delicious dish... This may well be the tastiest thing I have ever eaten in my entire life...”

Instantly, Roy’s eyebrows shot up.

“Hey, don’t go overboard with your flattery like that, slave girl. Or have you forgotten who exactly makes the food you test for poison each day?”

“I most certainly do not intend to look down on the cooking made by everyone else... I simply felt this dish was truly outstanding...”

“It looks like you don’t get it. The most distinguished chefs in all of Genos are gathered here in this manor. So I’m warning you, if you run your mouth and make light of them like that, you’re gonna get whipped.”

“Yes... But I was born in the nation of Mahyudra. As such, my tastes surely differ from those of westerners, so I do not believe I am making light of anyone...” Chiffon Chel replied with a smile.

It was at that point that Roy’s expression finally turned full-on hostile.

“So you’re saying you have no intention of taking back that drivel you spouted...?”

Chiffon Chel gave a troubled tilt of her head, then replied, “That is correct...” with a small nod.

In the next moment, Roy picked up the ladle left sitting beside the pot and threw it at her with all his might.

The projectile hit its mark right on her temple, and Chiffon Chel let out a feeble, “Ah...”

“You wretched slave woman!”

Roy then reached out and snatched up the karon milk container I left on the workstation. Right before he could throw it, though, I grabbed hold of his wrist.

“Cut it out! You’re flying off the handle over something like that?!”

Roy’s bloodshot eyes glared my way.

“Let me go. You’re just some fake chef from the post town. Who do you think

I am?"

"I've got no damn clue. You're the ones hiding your identities." Roy was squirming, so I firmed up my grasp. "Still, you're a chef too, right? In that case, you shouldn't be handling cooking utensils and ingredients like they're weapons."

Roy's face twisted in pain as the blue container fell back down on the workstation with a clunk.

"Oww! L-Let go! You're going to break my arm!"

"That's an exaggeration," I stated in astonishment, but I was taken aback when I saw how his eyes were tearing up. He might have been seriously hurting, here.

"Sir Asuta... Please, let go..." Chiffon Chel stated, clinging to my feet from where she had collapsed down on the floor. And when I turned to look at her, I gulped.

Over her head, I saw the soldiers grabbing the handles of their swords from beyond the door.

With that, I immediately let go, at which point Roy sunk to the brick floor and clasped his wrist up against his chest.

"Thank you... However, there is nothing for you to gain from covering for someone like myself, Sir Asuta..." Chiffon Chel stated.

I gave a big, deep sigh.

All that had been in my mind even while cooking up that dish had been, *I want to return to Ai Fa as soon as possible.*

2

The time between then and when night fell was nothing but suffering for me.

I was told I had to stay here in this manor until its owner finished eating dinner, and so I was once more jailed in the room from before.

Cooking had taken me a bit over an hour to complete. And so, there were still

around two hours left until sunset, when dinner would start. Plus, since I was in a position of having been captured by the enemy, I didn't exactly have any means available to me to alleviate my boredom. Ultimately, the only thing I could do was wait and worry while lying atop the fluffy bed.

"Sir Asuta... Shall I bring you something to drink, perhaps...?" Chiffon Chel quietly asked, leaning in from beyond the partitioning screen.

"No, I'm fine."

"I see... However, there is still quite some time left until dinner, so please do not hesitate to make any requests. After all, it is the duty given to me to fulfill them..." she said as she gracefully approached.

"My only wish is to be returned back home as soon as possible."

"And yet, that is the one request I cannot fulfill..."

The bed suddenly sunk ever so slightly.

Looking up, I found that Chiffon Chel was now lightly sitting at its foot. She placed just one arm down on the bedding, then twisted her body to face me. With those mysterious purple eyes staring straight at me, I unwittingly froze.

"W-Well then, how about we discuss something to stave off boredom?" I stuttered. "It can just be small talk, instead of anything about this manor or the nobles who live here."

"My..." Chiffon Chel said with a smile, bringing her hand to her lips. "But I know nothing of the world outside this manor. After all, I am not permitted to leave..."

"You were brought here against your will too at some point, right? I can't say I really know anything about the relationship between the west and the north, though..."

I went ahead and shifted myself to sit cross-legged in the middle of the bed.

It was hard to call it a topic that got me overly excited, but it certainly seemed preferable to letting my mind wander wildly.

"On top of that, I don't really know much about how slavery works in this country. You seem like you're able to act fairly freely, but... you're still a slave,

right?”

“Yes... I was captured by soldiers of Selva at a young age and brought here to Genos. However, I was able to learn the language of the west unusually quickly, which is how I ended up being permitted to live here within the manor walls...”

“That’s awful. I can’t even imagine what that must have been like...”

“No, but Genos is a peaceful place... I am certain that is because it is so far removed from Mahyudra. At the border between the nations, both sides view one another as hated enemies... And so, I am not treated so terribly here...”

I was about to bring up the point that she’d had a ladle thrown at her even so, but it seemed that didn’t fall under the classification of “terrible treatment.” This topic really might have been a bit too heavy for someone like me, born and raised in a peaceful nation like Japan.

“There’s fighting on the border between the southern and eastern nations too, right? But their peoples coexist here in Genos without fighting, even if they’re not exactly friendly with each other. So do westerners and northerners do the same in eastern lands too, for example?”

“I cannot say... My former home was far from Sym, so I do not know the answer...”

I had sensed as much right from the start, but it seemed Chiffon Chel really didn’t lament her circumstances at all.

Naturally, I had no way of knowing whether she just wasn’t letting it show, or if she had such feelings crushed out of her. The one thing I did know for sure, though, was that she was the one I could talk most frankly with in this awful, disgusting place.

“You are a truly mysterious person, Sir Asuta...” Chiffon Chel said with a relaxed smile. “You created that wondrous meal despite being from the post town... Though you are a westerner, you defended someone like me... And though you have such a gentle face, you also possess such strength...”

“Actually, it’s not easy finding someone as weak as me at the forest’s edge.”

However, that Roy guy was notably weaker than I was. Maybe I had actually

built up some muscle while living at the forest's edge.

"Yes, you are a truly, truly mysterious person. So much so that I cannot help but regret that we must part in but a few hours... This is the first time I have had such feelings since leaving my home nation..."

"I don't hate you either, Chiffon Chel."

If Cyclaeus fell, would it be possible for people like her to gain their freedom, too?

Considering the relationship between the west and north, it didn't seem especially likely, but still... For now, I'd at least have to eventually tell Kamyua Yoshu about how I met her here in this manor. Since he had mixed blood from the north and west, maybe he could come up with some sort of solid plan.

"It shall be getting dark soon..." Chiffon Chel stated, gently rising to her feet.

Then, she disappeared beyond the partitioning screen, only to return holding a lit candlestick. Actually, maybe it'd be more accurate to call it a lantern? After all, it was dangling from a metal handle, and the flame inside was protected by a glass cover.

It was true that there was a lot less light coming in through the small window now. It seemed that dinnertime was finally fast approaching.

Would my cooking be to the nobles' liking? And was there a chance I really would be released like I was promised if so? If not... then I may just have to consider escaping by force.

Ai Fa... You must have already returned home by now and heard what happened from Ludo Ruu and the others...

Just how angry was she at me for not fulfilling my promise to return home safely? And how sad, too?

There was a crushing pain in my chest, and my head felt heavy. The dark clouds inside me had shifted into a pitch black murky stream swirling about in my guts. If it weren't for the fact that I knew Ai Fa must be suffering even more than I was since she didn't even know what was going on, I probably would have wailed out as loud as I could, with no shame in the least.

It felt like torture as I sat there silently in the dim light, time slowly ticking by. Just when I was about at my limit and stepped down from the bed, though, the door to the room suddenly swung open from the outside.

“Asuta of the Fa clan, our employer is permitting you an audience.”

It was one of the guards who had been keeping watch.

I glared right back at him, wondering how the hell they justified using a word like “permitting” under these circumstances.

“Come this way. Woman, you’re to remain in this room.”

This time, I was finally going to get to meet the culprit behind all this face to face.

For now, I needed to focus on dealing with them calmly and carefully. After asking Chiffon Chel to just prepare my clothes to change into, I once more stepped out into the hallway.

Is it going to be Cycloeus himself, or one of his underlings...? At the very least, everything will be cleared up after this, I thought to myself as I walked through the eerie, dimly-lit hallway, which had countless lanterns hanging along its walls.

Our route this time ended up a good bit longer than when we went to the bathhouse or the kitchen.

This place really was like a labyrinth. No matter where we went, it was all just brick walls and rugs stretching out along the floor, so I really couldn’t tell anything apart. Even if I managed to somehow give the soldiers the slip, I got the feeling I would not only fail to find my way out, but I probably wouldn’t even be able to make it back to the room from before.

We went down the spiral staircase, walked for what felt like an eternity, and then ended up going up yet another set of stairs. A few more minutes of walking after that, we finally stood in front of a set of doors.

They were big, and clearly built differently than the ones we had passed along the way. The edges were reinforced with steel sheets, and the engraved decorations were truly splendid. They really had an antique, exaggerated look

about them... and to me, it was like they were the gates of hell.

“We have brought Asuta of the Fa clan!” one of the soldiers shouted. The doors were so thick that he needed to raise his voice that much just for it to reach, I figured.

From the other side, a man’s muffled voice replied, “Enter.”

With that, the soldiers grabbed onto the heavy looking doors and pulled them open.

Instantly, a dazzling light came spilling out into the hallway.

That was definitely some lavish lighting there. In fact, I had to half-shut my eyes so I wouldn’t be blinded as I stepped inside.

“Stop there,” a low male voice commanded.

The doors slowly closed, and the soldiers moved to either side of me.

This is the mastermind...? I thought with a gulp.

I had more or less heard what Cyclopeus looked like from Gazraan Rutim... and this wasn’t him. There was no way it could be.

“My lord... This person is Asuta of the Fa clan,” the low voice announced. The man who had been speaking so far was nothing but an officer serving under the lord in question.

He was clad in even more magnificent armor than the soldiers on either side of me, and certainly looked like he had to hold quite a high rank. His appearance, however, didn’t quite seem to match that attire. He had an oddly short and stout build, and a face like a particularly dim-witted bull.

However, none of that mattered.

No, the real issue was the owner of this room, who was glaring at me while lounging atop a fluffy couch... The culprit behind this whole ridiculous plot.

“Hmph. What a truly dull-looking man. Why, he’s still nothing but a child,” a high-pitched voice stated. It sounded somewhat childish, and had a lisp to it. Actually... It belonged to a young little girl. “I find it hard to believe such a child could have created a dish like that. This is truly Asuta of the Fa clan?”

“Yes. There is no doubt of that,” the short and stout officer gloomily replied.

“Hmph...” the girl muttered, looking me up and down with a seriously cheeky glare.

It was the haughty gaze of someone who was well accustomed to looking down at people.

And yet, she was definitely still just a kid.

She must have only been around ten or so. From the way she was lying down, it was hard to properly gauge her height, but she definitely seemed to be small and slender. However, that thin body of hers was wrapped up in a pure white dress that seemed like it was practically made entirely of frills and ribbons.

The upper portion seemed perfectly fitted to her form, while the waist downwards bloomed out wide into a layered skirt. It was a truly gorgeous, showy outfit that reminded me of a wedding dress.

The ivory-white skin of her shoulders and arms was almost fully exposed, except for her numerous accessories made of metal and jewels. Her chestnut-colored hair dangled down to around her chest, and she even wore a silver tiara atop her head.

It was in such attire that the girl was lying languidly atop the couch. And with that posture she was crushing the bottom half of the poofy skirt, which was a real waste.



She really did have a fitting appearance for a spoiled rich noble girl.

Her pale reddish-brown eyes were large and stood out distinctly, and her arched eyebrows, small nose, and budding cherry blossom-like lips were all exceptionally well proportioned. Her face was so small I could easily cover it with the palm of one hand, and her pure white skin wasn't tanned in the least and didn't have so much as a single blemish.

However, the girl's graceful face was wearing a rather displeased expression. And unlike when it was Ai Fa or Lala Ruu making such a look, hers was clearly overflowing with antipathy.

I could hear a warning signal ringing out in my head, telling me that she was going to be trouble.

"What is the meaning of that impudent staring...?" the girl questioned, her voice dripping with irritation. "Are you perhaps getting the wrong idea just because you happen to have a bit of cooking skill? Normally, someone as lowly as you would not even be allowed to stand in my presence, you know."

A number of retorts I'd love to use instantly sprung to mind. However, if I spoke out carelessly I could end up getting whipped for it. The girl's voice just had such a nasty tone to it that I couldn't help but feel that way.

"Are you the one who had me brought here...?"

I had no clue how I should deal with this little tyrant, and so I used the gentlest tone I could manage, though I didn't bother trying to use overly polite language.

She didn't seem to have any issues with how I was speaking to her, though, as she just thrust out her lower lip and seemed to be looking down at me.

"What, you're asking such a thing at this point? Hey, who are you really...? What country was it exactly where you learned such cooking techniques? You most certainly were not born in Genos, correct?"

"Before asking about my identity, won't you tell me yours first? Who in the world are you, exactly?"

"I am Lefreya." Apparently she thought that was enough of an answer, as she

immediately started pressing further. “I have never tasted such cooking before. From what I am told, you did not use any unusual ingredients, so what exactly did you do? What land does that dish hail from? From what I can tell, you look to have mixed blood, but from which nations? Sym? Jagar? Not Mahyudra, surely.”

“I come from an island nation outside of this continent, by the name of Japan,” I went ahead and earnestly responded, seeing no other option.

“From overseas?!” Lefreya questioned, her eyes opening wide. “I see... In that case, I can understand how you could make food of the sort I have never seen before! But what is someone from overseas doing right in the middle of the continent? Do your people not restrict themselves to visiting only Mahyudra and Sym briefly for business, and then promptly return overseas?”

“No, that’s...”

“To start with, kimyuus and karon only exist in Selva and Jagar, do they not? So how were you able to create such a dish even so? You are but a child, so how could you possibly do such a thing? Really, just who exactly are you?”

Ultimately, we ended up circling back to her initial question.

I took a moment to reassess, trying to figure out just what to do here. And as I did so, I went ahead and took in the room a bit, too.

It was a truly luxurious chamber, fitting for a noble’s dwelling. Though the room wasn’t all that wide, there was not only a thick rug on the floor, but also tapestries with geometric patterns along the walls that almost entirely hid the bricks from view.

The couch the girl was lying on reminded me of a sofa bed, and could probably fit four grown adults sitting normally.

And between me and the room’s owner, there was a grand table with a wine-colored cloth, atop which sat a woven basket filled with a variety of colorful flowers.

On top of that, there were some strange stone statues in the four corners of the room. While they were definitely decorative, were they also meant as some sort of charm to ward off evils? At any rate, they had the appearance of some

sort of bizarre satyr creature with the face of a lion, torso of a man, and limbs of a horse or deer or something. And they were made of smooth, gleaming white, marble-like stone, and were each holding a sword or a spear and facing the center of the room. Between the bared fangs of their lion faces, the shoulder muscles tensing as they brandished their weapons, and their huge raised hooves, all wildly chiseled into shape, they almost felt like they would start moving at any moment.

What warranted even more attention, though, was the room's lighting fixture. There was a massive chandelier-like object dangling from the high ceiling, filling the room with bright white light like the midday sun. It had a diameter of around a meter, and was shaped like a jeweled crown. That degree of luxury wouldn't be all that unusual back in my old land, but considering the level of development here in this world, it certainly was a surprise. I didn't know whether they were glass or crystal, but the dozens of lit candles were reflecting light off of countless bits of decoration.

And what were those candles made of, for that matter? There was a faintly sweet, gentle smell filling the room. Plus there wasn't much smoke, either. They were definitely rarer and more high-quality than the animal fat candles used at the forest's edge.

"Answer my questions. What exactly are you staring idly for?" Lefreya urged in a tone that made it sound like her anger was about to explode at any moment.

"I don't really think I could come up with a reply that would satisfy your curiosity... I just suddenly found myself here in this land, after all," I answered, carefully choosing my words. "But at any rate, I don't come from this continent, and back in my home nation, there were plenty of chefs my age. It may seem a bit curious to you, but that's all there is to it."

"Hmph..."

"Now then, will you answer my questions now? Who exactly are you, and why did you have me brought here to this manor? And at knife point, at that."

At that, the girl's mouth tightly shut and she shot me a displeased glare.

"And this man here..." I said, glancing at the officer positioned next to the

couch. “You’re one of the men who abducted me, aren’t you? As someone serving at a noble’s manor, how do you end up being such a criminal?”

Honestly, that was something of a leading question on my part.

However, his particular build and muffled voice were familiar to me.

His dark brown hair swirled in an unkempt manner, and it was clear just from looking at him that he was a westerner. And he had a puffy, unhealthy-looking face that made it hard to gauge exactly how old he was. Still, if nothing else, he definitely looked strong. From underneath his swollen eyelids, his small brown eyes shot me back a sharp glare.

“I have some idea as to who exactly owns this manor. However, the person I’m thinking of should currently be participating in important meetings at the Genos castle. Is he aware of what you all have done? After all, I’d imagine he wouldn’t want to spark off needless trouble with the people of the forest’s edge.”

I got no response.

“You said your name was Lefreya, right? What exactly are you to Count Cyclaeus Turan?”

With that, the girl suddenly sat up. Her frilly clumped-up skirt stretched back out, and started sparkling in the light of the chandelier.

And then, she started stamping her feet in frustration out of nowhere.

“What does Father have to do with anything?! When he is not around, I am in charge of this manor!”

“‘Father’...? So you’re Cyclaeus’s daughter, Lefreya?”

Well, that was probably the most innocuous answer.

The fact that there was a northerner serving here as a slave had already pretty much confirmed this place was Cyclaeus’s manor, but he was currently supposed to be in the castle. And so, this revelation cleared up that contradiction. Plus, as Cyclaeus’s daughter, she would have had a chance to hear of my place’s reputation through Diel.

That was enough to clear up most of the doubts whirling about inside of me.

In all likelihood, Cyclaeus had nothing to do with this incident. After all, I couldn't imagine him approving of such actions, especially when he wasn't even around.

"Right, I think I more or less get what's going on. So... what do you intend to do with me, exactly? The story they told me was that if you judged I held back with my cooking, you would forbid me from doing business in the post town."

Still no answer.

"Like I explained, I'm a chef who was born in another nation entirely. I certainly tried to give my all when making that dish, but I don't know how well it fits the tastes of people from this land. Still, I definitely didn't hold back."

I was still feeling more than a little dumbfounded, but I did my best to keep to a fairly calm tone.

While I certainly wasn't about to forgive them for taking Nail hostage, since it seemed like this plot was nothing more than the result of a pampered noble girl's curiosity or mischievousness, it should have still been possible to bring everything to a peaceful close.

"I don't need any sort of reward, so just let me go home. And of course, I'd like to keep doing business as I have up till now... That's all that I ask for. Can you find it in yourself to grant those requests?"

Lefreya just kept on silently biting her lip.

I didn't think this small girl had really been granted authority to do as she pleased with my business, but I couldn't say that for certain.

Still, I wouldn't mind if that matter was just put off at least. After all, there would be one heck of a commotion in the post town if my stalls were shut down over something this ridiculous. And at any rate, we should have a chance to freshly renegotiate once Cyclaeus and Melfried returned from the castle in five days.

Thanks to all that, just getting to return home would be plenty. That was my one desire here.

"You are a truly irritating man..." Lefreya finally stated, her neatly-shaped

eyebrows sternly furrowing.

With that, I straightened up my posture, worrying I may have spoken a bit too hastily.

However, rather than letting her anger burst forth, she instead silently stretched out her slender fingers over the table. Atop her palm sat what looked like a small jewelry case, and from it she pulled out a little silver object.

Then she tossed it so that it made a short arc and landed at my feet. It was the type of shining silver coin I had several of back at the Fa house.

Each one was worth 100 white coins or 1000 red, and you pretty much only ever saw them at a money changer in the post town.

“So you’re offering this as a reward...? But this is far too much money, no matter how you look at it.”

I generally earned one silver coin’s worth of profit in four days or so, as my current daily take came out to about 250 red coins. If I were to earnestly accept this, I’d honestly probably end up giving it to Nail for the trouble.

As that thought ran through my head, Lefreya responded with the same hostile look on her face, “What are you saying? That is your payment for the work that you did.”

“Payment?” I questioned, picking up the coin at my feet and tilting my head.

What exactly was the difference between a reward and payment?

“I still have not fully acknowledged your skills. And so, you are to do work equal to that payment.”

“Huh? I don’t understand what you’re—”

“First will be tomorrow’s midday snack. If you satisfy me with that, I will grant you another silver coin,” Lefreya stated, suddenly cutting me off and then turning her back to me. “Well then, I will rest now. And you are to prepare for tomorrow.”

“H-Hold on a moment! What do you mean, tomorrow’s snack? Weren’t you supposed to return me home, regardless of what impression you got?!”

Lefreya stopped, then shot me a harsh glare out of the corner of her eye.

“Be quiet. I am the owner of this manor. Everyone within its walls must obey my words.”

“That’s insane! There are some things even nobles can’t get away with, right?!” I shouted, stepping forward without thinking.

However, the guards on either side of me swiftly grabbed hold of my arms. Even so, I couldn’t just remain silent.

“Then let me just say, doing something like this is going to put your father at a real disadvantage! He holds all sorts of discussions with the people of the forest’s edge as representative for Genos, right? As his daughter, these actions of yours will put him in a real bad position!”

“Did you not hear me tell you to be quiet...?”

“You’re the one who needs to listen to what I have to say! If you don’t want this whole thing to blow up, then let me go *now*! It’s still not too late to just laugh this off! But if you add to your crimes further—”

“You say my father will be put in a bad position?” Lefreya repeated, interrupting me again as her well proportioned little face broke out in a devilish grin. “That sounds interesting in its own way. Just what sort of face will that man make when he returns five days from now in a rage? Yes, that is certain to prove amusing.”

“Hey, wait—!”

“Well then, the time limit shall be five days. My father is to return in the morning five days from now, so create a dish that truly satisfies me down to the depths of my heart before then. Do so, and I shall grant you another silver coin, and may even allow you to return home before those five days are up.” At that point, Lefreya stopped for a moment and broke out in a mischievous smile. “However, make a truly dull dish and I shall make sure you can never do business in the post town again, no matter what Father has to say on the matter. If you do not like the thought of that, then strive away as hard as you can.”

“Hold on!” I shouted to no avail at the girl’s small back.

With that, the young tyrant disappeared behind the inner doors opened by her short and stout attendant... leaving me to stand there with the soldiers still gripping my arms, holding the shining silver coin in my hand and trembling with pure rage.

3

This is no joke! I can't keep playing along with this farce any longer!

That was pretty much all that was whirling about in my head, even after being returned to the room.

It was good news that Cyclaeus apparently had nothing to do with this plot. However, that didn't change the fact that I couldn't possibly endure five whole days imprisoned here in this manor.

Just what was that Lefreya girl thinking? Had she heard of my skill from Diel and decided to go ahead with this ridiculous plan? No matter how much I might have to give in to them, and even if I was willing to overlook how they hurt people to make this happen, I absolutely couldn't accept the way she went back on her word and was continuing to hold me against my will.

It seemed like maybe she didn't get along well with her father, Cyclaeus, but I couldn't care less. They could go settle their family squabbles however they pleased, as long as they did it far from me.

At any rate, I was good and pissed off. And the one to timidly call out to me as I smoldered with rage was Chiffon Chel, who was assigned to watch over me.

"Sir Asuta, are you alright...? Shall I bring you something to drink before you fall asleep...?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Well then, how about something to eat...? Now that you are to be staying here at this manor, it would be better to eat something before sleeping..."

I felt like shouting, "I've got no intention of staying overnight!" but it wasn't like she had done anything wrong, so I stopped myself.

"Um, could I ask you a question, Chiffon Chel?"

“Yes? What is it...?”

“Are there any eastern-looking guys among the soldiers or servants working at this manor?”

“An easterner, is it...?” Chiffon Chel repeated with a troubled tilt of her head.

Is that something she can't answer either? I thought, but it seemed it was more that she was searching her memories to come up with a proper reply.

“I am uncertain... At the very least, I do not believe there should be anyone like that living at the manor...”

“So there could be one among the employees who commute here?”

“No... As a general rule, both soldiers and servants who work here are to live within the grounds... The cooking assistants and the like who have other work reside elsewhere, but even when I have visited the kitchen to taste for poison, I have never seen anyone with such dark skin...” Chiffon Chel replied, but then she tilted her head the other way. “However... It is not uncommon for guests from Sym to visit to discuss business with the master. They generally return when the sun is still high in the sky, though, so I have never had the chance to entertain them...”

“I see. Thank you.”

In that case, even if Sanjura had ties to this manor, he wasn't close enough to them to be offered a place to stay here.

His involvement was the one thing I still had doubts about.

It seemed Sanjura's “employer” he had mentioned was Lefreya rather than Cyclaeus. But then, what was he doing serving that childish tyrant, exactly?

Had he been under some sort of orders when he first approached my stalls? And were his smile and gentle demeanor all just an act to get me to let my guard down? Such thoughts were just stirring up even more anger and frustration in me at the thought that I had been betrayed by someone I trusted.

Still, this is no time to be worrying about stuff like that, I thought with a big shake of my head, clearing those concerns from my mind.

“Chiffon Chel, I'd like to put my trust in you and ask one more question...”

“Yes? What is it...?”

“I’m planning on trying to escape from this manor shortly. Is that something you could overlook for me?”

I was well aware that it was absurd to ask such a thing. If she betrayed my expectations and was actually loyal to her employer, my plot would be ruined on the spot.

But if I was going to escape I had to do something about this girl who was sharing a room with me. And I wasn’t confident in the least that I could restrain her without those soldiers on the other side of the door noticing.

“That is... Even without my interference, I do not believe such a thing is possible. There are a great number of soldiers keeping watch about this manor...” Chiffon Chel replied, not looking overly surprised.

“I figured I wasn’t likely to succeed, either. And would they kill me if I failed, too?”

“No... They would not be able to do something so distasteful as to take your life. After all, Lady Lefreya is still but ten years old...”

“But like I’ve said again and again, I was threatened with knives and taken here against my will. And that little lady of yours is the one who ordered that.”

“Even if that is indeed the case, I believe Lady Lefreya would only have ordered that you were to be invited here to this manor. I am unaware of how that would have resulted in such crude methods being employed, though...”

I thought back to that officer with the stupid-cow face who served under the girl in question. Was it his decision to interpret his employer’s orders in that way?

“In that case, if I screwed up I’d just be whipped? I think I can scrounge up enough courage to risk it.”

“Sir Asuta, the risk is far greater than you realize...” Chiffon Chel replied, getting down from the bed and grabbing my arm. Rather than looking shaken, though, she seemed more like she was trying to calm an unreasonable child or something. “Being whipped is not so light of a punishment... Fortunately, I have

only faced it a handful of times myself, but it was painful enough to make one want to give up on living...”

“Is that so...?”

“Would you like to view my back...?”

“No, I’ll pass,” I replied, backing away from Chiffon Chel as all sorts of emotions simmered in my heart. “Even so, I can’t bring myself to just quietly accept my fate. I won’t push you to cooperate, but could I at least ask you not to say anything?”

“Why do you feel the need to place yourself in such danger...? Once five days have passed, you will be able to return home without needing to do such a thing, will you not...?”

“Because I don’t exactly trust that promise. Once your true employer returns from the castle and learns of his daughter’s careless actions, there’s no guarantee he won’t decide the best thing to do would be to erase me entirely.”

Those words were ultimately met with a sad, silent smile. It seemed she couldn’t quite bring herself to say Cyclopeus wouldn’t do such a thing, either.

Apparently the image I had of the man wasn’t far off the mark. How very reassuring.

“In that case, even if it’s reckless I feel I need to put my life on the line and give it my all to avoid that fate. So, will you look the other way?”

“Yes... However, the door is locked from the outside, and is watched by guards day and night...”

“Right. And that’s why I was thinking of escaping through the window instead.”

I confirmed just a little while ago that there were large windows on the other side of the partitioning screen. And they even had some sort of fabric curtains dangling from them, too. Though this room was on the second floor, as long as I was willing to take the chance, using those curtains to climb down the wall was definitely possible.

“I’m sorry, but if you’re willing to keep quiet about my actions, I was thinking I

would tie your wrists together to make it look like I forcefully escaped. But is there a risk you'll still get whipped even so?"

"My... You are thinking of such matters even when preparing to put your own safety at risk...?" Chiffon Chel questioned with an amused grin. "If I am whipped even so, then that is simply how it shall be. That is nothing for you to worry yourself about..."

"In that case... How about you run away with me?" I proposed, leaning back in toward Chiffon Chel. "I know that maybe I shouldn't be asking this... But if you're going to be whipped either way, then why not bet on that slight chance?"

"No... Unlike you, Sir Asuta, if I were to attempt to escape and fail, I would surely be beheaded... Not by Lady Lefreya, but by my master who shall be returning five days hence..."

"I see..."

Apparently I had really underestimated how badly they treated slaves. And I'm sure Chiffon Chel thought I was a huge idiot about now.

"If you have firmed up your resolve that far, then I can no longer stop you. Please, follow your own path as you feel is proper... I shall remain here and pray for your success..."

"But you may end up getting whipped as a result, right?"

"Please, do not worry yourself about that... However, I must admit that I was a bit excited when I heard that you would be staying here in this manor for five days. That is my one regret..." Chiffon Chel said before shooting me another smile.

It was a fairy-like smile, and I found it difficult to read just what exactly was behind it.

"You truly are a mysterious man, Sir Asuta... There are southerners and westerners who would sympathize with my circumstances, but no one has ever been as kind as you..."

"I'm sure that's because I come from a country where slavery doesn't exist..."

and because I'm a person of the forest's edge. They're a persecuted people because they changed gods. While I don't understand a single thing about the conflict between the north and west, I just can't accept the idea of discriminating against someone because of their birthplace."

The same look still fixed on her face, Chiffon Chel whispered, "I see..." I had no way of knowing whether she was feeling resignation, or just keeping her gaze fixed on the distant future.

"Well then, sorry about this, but I'm going to go ahead with my crazy escape plan. If it seems like it really is impossible, I'll try to make it back before the lookouts spot me... and then you won't have to be whipped."

"I will be praying a path opens for you to succeed, Sir Asuta..." Chiffon Chel stated.

Since I was escaping on my own while leaving her behind, I definitely felt more than a little guilty. Even more so since I had essentially no chance of succeeding.

Still, I didn't feel like just obediently pulling up the blankets and going to sleep. Lefreya's behavior was much too self-centered, and besides, there was no guarantee that everything would truly be settled in five days. And so, I had to struggle as best I could.

"Are you truly alright, dressing without my assistance...?"

"Yes! Please don't peek, alright?"

First off was changing into my original clothing, which I had Chiffon Chel bring here to this room. I put on the white t-shirt and boat shoes I had brought with me to this world and the additional clothing I had received from Ai Fa, then wrapped my seriously wrinkled towel around my head to complete the outfit. As for the shining silver coin I had been forced to bring back to this room, I placed it atop the clothes I had just finished taking off.

Next up came the preparations for my escape.

To start with, I circled around to the rear of the partitioning screen and removed the curtains from the windows. Through some serious effort with my teeth and hands I managed to tear them vertically, then tied them together

while testing their strength. By removing three curtains from the two windows, I was able to prepare a sufficient length of makeshift rope.

With the leftover cloth, I went ahead and bound Chiffon Chel's arms. And once again, I felt incredibly guilty as I did so.

If she gave a single shout for help to the guards outside the door at this point, she would surely be able to avoid getting whipped, but she refused to do so.

"I ask that you please gag my mouth as well... Then I shall act as if I had lost consciousness, which should surely aid in lightening my punishment..."

After doing as she asked, I went ahead and laid Chiffon Chel atop her personal bed on the other side of the partitioning screen. With that, I gave her one last nod, then extinguished the lantern and opened one of the windows wide.

The world outside was awash in shadow. Though the moon and stars were shining faintly, everything was still completely dark. But at least the darkness made it easy to tell there were no lantern-carrying guards in the area.

It would have been better had I checked while it was light out, but there seemed to be a vast courtyard stretching out below. And if I kept heading straight through there, I would eventually hit the stone walls surrounding the grounds. Though the castle town itself was already walled in, this manor had an additional layer of protection around it.

Even assuming I managed to somehow make it all the way there without being spotted, it was possible there was no way at all for me to make it over that wall. And even if I did, what lay on the other side was the castle town, which remained a complete mystery to me.

Could I make it back to the post town without a pass? I was attempting this escape without even knowing that crucial fact. Honestly, my hopes of success might well have been nonexistent. And if I failed, even if I was lucky I would face a whipping as punishment. Before thoughts of just how downright stupid I was being could spoil my drive to move forward, I went ahead and tied my handmade rope to the foot of the bed.

Even when I went ahead and leaned out to look to the left and right, I found that the windows to all the other rooms were shut tight. And so, with that

confirmed, I tossed the end of the rope out the window.

Alright, here goes.

It was time for a bit of unsanctioned rock climbing.

It was around four meters to the ground, so it wasn't like I would die even if I fell. But since it was stone paving down below me, I could definitely end up breaking something. At any rate, I moved outside the window, trusting in the strength I had built up through the harsh lifestyle of the forest's edge.

As I put my full body weight on it, the rope went taut and made a tightening sound. And with that, I went ahead and placed my feet on the wall and began slowly, steadily descending.

It didn't take long at all for both my arms to start trembling. And in spite of the pleasant night breeze, my whole body was coated in sweat. I couldn't help but feel that I really should have replenished some calories before trying something like this after all.

Still, I ultimately completed my rock climbing journey and made it to the hard ground below without anyone finding me, having my hands slip, or running out of strength midway down.

The first thing I did out there in the darkness was fall to my knees and catch my breath.

The world around me was wrapped in a bluish darkness. But as my eyes adjusted, my surroundings vaguely started coming into view. The stone pavement only circled around the building itself, and five meters or so out there was what looked to be a sprawling lawn that was kept cut short.

I really don't see any light anywhere. Just how far does this courtyard stretch, exactly...?

At any rate, no light meant there shouldn't be any guards keeping an eye out. Perhaps any guards about were focusing their watch outside the walls rather than inside.

With that thought, I prepared to finally step forwards... only for a window about a meter away from me to creak open.

I rushed to press myself against the wall. Though I had just managed to calm my heart, it was now pounding away like a jackhammer.

Was this just a coincidence, or had I made a sound without realizing it and given myself away...? At any rate, all I could do was desperately pray that whoever opened that window didn't peek out.

Those hopes turned out to be in vain, though, as a girl's pale face soon appeared from inside.

It wasn't Lefreya, though. No, it was an older girl, though she was definitely still young.

And when I saw how pretty her profile was, I was shocked again.

Her face was stunningly beautiful. Her nose was slender and perfectly shaped, and the lines of her profile from her chin up through her cheeks were so smooth.

On top of that, her skin was pure white. Though Lefreya had also been pale, this girl's skin was practically transparent. With the pale blue moonlight shining down on her, she almost looked like a glass sculpture.

And her dark brown bangs gently hung down over a beautifully white forehead. The left side of her face was the one facing me, and from what I could see, she had a stylish silver accessory shining away in her hair.

She had her hands on the window frame, and was actually leaning quite far forwards. So much so that I could see the thin, pale nightgown she had on.

And since her hair was short, the white of the back of her neck was even visible.

Yes, this girl had a truly angelic appearance.

However, her eyes were filled with a great sorrow as she stared off into the dark.



Those perfectly-crafted lips of hers let loose a sigh... and then in the process of pulling back into her room, she casually glanced my way.

Instantly, her large eyes adorned with fine eyelashes shot wide open in shock.

“Asuta...?! What are you doing in a place like this?!”

I was completely taken aback too.

Until a moment ago, that face had an angelic calm about it that looked almost sculpted, but now it had taken on a more down-to-earth expression and shifted into a very familiar girl’s visage.

“D-Diel...? It was you...?”

As I stood there frozen in shock, Diel glanced about the darkness in a panic.

Then, with a look of irritation she said, “Ugh, whatever! Just hurry inside already! If you stand around in a place like that, this manor’s guard dogs will maul you to death!”

“G-Guard dogs?”

“Yeah! We were told to never go outside since they let guard dogs loose in the courtyard at night. What, do you not know what a dog is? They’re pretty common down south, but... Agh, never mind! Just get in here!”

I was even more flustered than Diel, so I ended up stepping over toward her practically without even thinking. With that, she grabbed me by the nape of the neck and pulled me into the dimly lit room.

“Ugh, that was a shock... Don’t go scaring me like that! Seriously, what are you even doing in a place like this?!” Diel wailed, and then she suddenly clamped both hands over her mouth. In the next moment, there was a knock from outside the door opposite the hallway.

“Did you say something, Master Diel?”

It was Labis’s voice, which I hadn’t heard in a while either.

“It’s nothing! I was just talking to myself! We’ve got work tomorrow morning, so we should hurry to sleep, right?”

“I wish you good dreams, Master Diel...” Labis responded in a blunt tone that

made it hard to tell what he was thinking, and then he went silent.

Apparently this room was adjoined to another one through that door, and that other room had been assigned to Labis.

“Diel... So you were in this manor after all, huh?”

“What do you mean ‘after all’? And besides, what are you even doing in the castle town, Asuta?” Diel whispered back as she gently closed the window.

And then, she went, “Ah!” with another look of surprise. “Um, could it be... that you’re the one who made the meal we just ate?”

“Ah, yeah, you mean the one made with karon milk and kimyuus meat? If so, then yeah, I made that.”

“I knew it. That was seriously delicious,” Diel said with a truly satisfied grin. It honestly made her look like an angel again, but in a different way entirely compared to before. “I mean, that meal was so delicious that I thought of you somehow when I ate it. In fact, I was wondering how you were doing and if you were asleep yet, when I opened the window and then suddenly there you were! Seriously, I was so shocked I almost keeled over!”

Then Diel was thinking of me when she had that sad look in her eyes before? That felt kinda embarrassing, somehow.

On top of that, thanks to the lantern’s flame lighting the room, I could now see Diel clearly. Her unusual speckled hair and her beautiful sparkling eyes like jade were fully visible... as was that outfit that was utterly different from what she usually wore.

It was a thin bit of nightwear, sure enough. Aside from the frills adorning the collar and cuffs, it was a very simply designed gown.

And it only came up to a bit above her knees, so her surprisingly pale legs were plainly visible. Then there was the silver hair clip holding back her bangs, revealing a bit of her forehead. But that was enough to make her like an entirely different, totally adorable person.

No wait, if we were just talking cuteness, she already had that in spades to start with. So that wasn’t it. No, it was more that she looked more girlish and

charming than ever before. Seriously, what was wrong with my eyes that I mistook her for a boy when we first met?

“So...? What are you doing making food here in this manor? Didn’t you say the people of the forest’s edge and folks from the castle town didn’t exactly get along?”

I knew it was dangerous to just hang out with her, but this chance encounter was one heck of a relief. Still, I went ahead and covered just the key points, as quickly as I could manage.

“Eh?” “Really?” “Whoa!” Diel exclaimed as she listened, her expressions shifting like a kaleidoscope all the while. “So... In other words, I was the cause of all this when I bragged to Lefreya about your cooking?” Diel sadly asked once I finished. “I’m so sorry... I really do bring you nothing but disaster, huh...?”

“That’s not true at all. The real root of this trouble is that spoiled little brown-haired brat. If she had a normal sense of morals, she’d never do something like this.”

I found it even harder than normal tonight to see Diel looking like a dejected puppy.

“Still, I figure Lefreya got all worked up because your cooking was way tastier than she had been expecting.”

“‘Worked up’? What do you mean?”

“Right, well, actually, she had two dishes made with karon milk and kimyuus meat brought out. And then Lefreya said we should eat them both and compare which one was better,” Diel said, her expression growing more and more apologetic. “So the other dish must have been prepared by the chefs working in this manor. That boiled kimyuus meat with karon dried milk was pretty good too, but the soup with all the vegetables in it was way better. That was the one you made, right, Asuta?”

“Yeah.”

“I knew it! It was such a mysterious dish! Anyway, my old man and I didn’t know any of that and were going on and on like, ‘That soup dish is so delicious! That’s a manor that prides itself on its cooking for you!’ So I’m sure Lefreya was

none too pleased with that.”

Apparently the three dishes worth of stew I made went into the stomachs of Lefreya, Diel, and Diel’s father. I had heard her dad was a metalworker visiting from Jagar, and that Cyclaeus was an important business partner for him.

But putting that aside, I still wasn’t fully satisfied with that explanation.

“So she didn’t like the fact that the chef she abducted by force had the better dish? I don’t get it at all.”

“No, Lefreya probably never expected you to put out a dish that good. After all, she was always insisting that stuff made by chefs in the post town didn’t even qualify as proper food.”

I could recall Diel having said something like that before. In fact, she had said she wanted to bring my cooking back to the castle town in order to prove her point.

“Thinking back on it now, Lefreya looked seriously displeased after having us try the dishes. She must have been expecting us to heap praise on the other meal, then call me to your room later to show me up.”

“Whoa, that’s an awfully sneaky game she’s playing there!”

“I’d say it’s more that she just hates to lose... Well, I do too, but to think that she’d go and do something this crazy...”

“There’s nothing for you to worry yourself over, Diel. Still... just why exactly did she decide to keep me confined longer, then? Does she want me to keep on cooking till my dish loses her competition?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. Maybe it’s more that she just plain took a liking to your cooking? I mean, she really chowed down on your dish too. Though, her eyebrows had this really steep angry slant the whole time.”

Like father, like daughter, I guess. Couldn’t she show her appreciation for my skills in a more normal way?

“So her father really doesn’t know about any of this, right? Or maybe I should say she went ahead with this ridiculous plan now because he wasn’t around to interfere?”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s the case. Whenever I talked about your cooking, that old man just gave a disinterested smirk. There’s no way he would’ve let Lefreya do something so stupid,” Diel replied, and then she leaned her face in close. “So, you were planning to escape on your own because you weren’t satisfied with Lefreya’s words?”

“Yeah, though I know it’s reckless.”

“It sure is! Like I said before, they let guard dogs loose in the courtyard, and the stone walls around the place are huge. And it’s not just the dogs, since there are definitely guards patrolling those walls too. I mean, this is the manor of possibly the most powerful noble in all of Genos, other than the duke.”

“Right...”

“And let’s say you *do* make it out by some fluke. Even then, you still wouldn’t be able to leave the castle town. They raise the drawbridge at night, and during the day you need a pass to get through. And if you try to force your way through, you’ll definitely be treated as a criminal.”

Apparently it was completely hopeless.

I gave a disappointed shrug of my shoulders, while Diel reacted with a worried furrowing of her brows.

“I’m sorry, Asuta. This is all my fault... Still, your cooking skills really did beat a chef from the castle town after all! What about working here in this manor for real? Then you could earn enough coins that you’d be set for life, right?”

“I could never do that. There’s no way I could serve someone who’d do something like this, and I’ve got no intention of abandoning the forest’s edge, either.”

“I see... It still feels like a waste for someone with your skill to just be doing business in the post town, though...” Diel replied, looking earnestly disappointed. I guess for a merchant, doing business near the seat of government really was an honor.

I had no intention of arguing against her way of thinking, but I was raised in an eatery aimed at the general public. And so, I wanted to cook food for the townsfolk rather than nobles. No matter how much power they might possess, I

really had no interest at all in being a personal chef to someone like that.

“Hey Diel, would it be possible to have you try to convince Lefreya? I really would like to return back home to the forest’s edge as soon as possible.”

“There’s no way she would listen to what I had to say... In fact, she’d probably just get even more worked up if I went and got involved.”

“Then could I maybe have you tell someone in the post town what happened? If you let one of my business partners there know, they should be able to get in contact with the people of the forest’s edge.”

“Hmm, I’m going to be busy for a while, and it doesn’t seem like I’ll be able to make it out of the castle town. My dad’s running around like mad trying to expand his business as much as possible while the count isn’t around. Apparently he’s been getting the feeling that it’s dangerous to be relying on that old man alone.”

“I’d definitely say that’s the right call. Still, even just getting a short message out to anyone in the post town would be plenty. I’d really like to put my family and friends who know nothing about what’s going on at ease.”

“By family, do you mean that nasty blonde woman?” Diel asked, puffing up her cheeks. But they quickly deflated and she took an apologetic expression again. “I get that, but it really does seem like it’ll be difficult... Even if I try talking about it with my dad, he’d just say there’s no way we could ever go throwing our lot in with the people of the forest’s edge and making an enemy out of a noble... And he took away my pass, too.”

“I see...”

But then I recalled Diel’s attendant, Labis. No matter how close I got with the girl herself, though, his unfriendly attitude had remained unshakable.

Generally, southerners viewed the people of the forest’s edge as nothing but traitors who abandoned their god. There were those who I met through my business in the post town and got close to, but otherwise they generally avoided or even discriminated against the people of the forest’s edge.

“Still, there’s no need to go all the way to the post town personally, right? Tomorrow or whenever, I can slip away from my dad and let the guards in the

castle town know about all this! Even when we're talking about nobles, kidnapping is still a clear-cut crime!"

"Ah, but don't the guards around here ultimately fall under the militia? It's not the ducal guard, right?"

"Hmm? I don't really know the west all that well, but the ducal guard are the soldiers who protect the castle itself, aren't they? But the guards are the ones in charge of both the castle town and post town."

In that case, that was no good. After all, Cyclaeus's younger brother was the captain of the militia. If word of Lefreya's wrongdoing reached his ears, he would probably do everything in his power to cover it up.

"The people of the forest's edge and the militia don't exactly have a great relationship. Sorry, but could you avoid spreading information about this to just anyone in the castle town?"

"Huh? But I really don't want you getting gnawed to death by guard dogs..." Diel said, a serious look on her face as she tightly grabbed my hand. Her grasp was strong, and also warm.

"I've got no intention of dying a pointless death, either. But I guess that means I've got no moves left to make, huh?"

There had to be a pretty significant commotion in the post town by now. However, there wouldn't be any proof to be found there that it was someone related to Cyclaeus who had abducted me. And so, I figured neither the people of the forest's edge nor Zasshuma could make a move with how things stood.

"Isn't there anything at all I can do to help...? If it weren't for me, you wouldn't be in this whole mess..." Diel said, her eyes brimming with emotion as they teared up.

Mustering up all my willpower, I shot her back a smile.

"I'd be incredibly grateful if you could try to get in contact with my allies from the forest's edge if you happen to get time between your work. You're the only one here in the castle town I can ask that of, Diel."

"Got it. If I can manage to get any time at all, I swear I'll do so!"

Apparently Diel's voice had gotten too loud there again, as there was a reserved knock on the door.

"Master Diel, what exactly is going on...?"

"I was just talking in my sleep!"

"Is that so...?"

This clandestine meeting of ours may well have reached its limit.

And besides, the rope I had used to escape was still dangling from the window. If anyone realized, Chiffon Chel could easily end up getting whipped for nothing.

"Well then, I'll head back to my room. Thanks for telling me all that."

"Ah, hold on! Let me just say one last thing. Um, about Lefreya..." Diel cast her eyes down, looking like she was having trouble bringing herself to speak up. But before long, she resolutely stated, "I really, seriously hate nobles. If it weren't necessary for business, I'd never want anything to do with them. But I can't bring myself to completely hate that girl."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yeah. It feels to me like she's never been glad that she's a noble, somehow. Her father's always focused on work and gourmet food and never pays her any mind, and her days are filled with nothing but studies and practice, with no time to play... In a totally different way than her old man, that girl's one bit of enjoyment each day comes from delicious food."

Apparently there was a significant reason behind her growing up to be such an ill-tempered little tyrant.

"Does she not have any family other than her father? Isn't the house of Count Turan one of the foremost noble families in Genos?"

"Well, she should have plenty of relatives, but Lefreya and the old man are the only ones living here in this manor. And all the servants and soldiers, of course. I figure outside of when guests like me and my dad are around, that girl doesn't have anyone she can just have a carefree chat with."

"I see..."

“That’s why she doesn’t care at all about making her father mad by doing something like this. She might even be thinking she’d be glad to just get his attention a bit.”

“Is that so? Well... if it weren’t for the circumstances, I could see myself feeling some sympathy for her.”

Still, I guess that didn’t really leave me a target to aim my anger at.

I really was just someone who got mixed up in a father-daughter squabble, huh?

“And I certainly can’t forgive doing something like this to you, but that girl probably can’t even imagine you’re feeling unhappy with the circumstances. After all, apparently it’s a great honor for a chef to be invited to this manor. So she’s probably thinking, ‘Why isn’t he more grateful for what I’ve done?!’”

“Hm. Well, we definitely have different perspectives, there.”

“Also, the one who decided to take you by force rather than making a proper request... was probably Mussel rather than Lefreya.”

“Mussel?”

“If you met Lefreya, then you definitely saw him too. That dark brown haired officer who’s stout like a karon.”

“Ah, him? Yeah, he was one of the men who abducted me.”

“I knew it! Apparently he’s been in charge of guarding Lefreya and constantly attending to her ever since she was born. It sounds nice and all if you just call him loyal, but he’s got a scary side to him, like he’d do *anything* if it was for her. In fact, he almost hit me when I was arguing with Lefreya. Labis stopped him, of course.”

“I see... So a spoiled rich girl and the blindly obedient officer serving her, huh?”

It definitely wasn’t an appealing combination.

I still didn’t get how Sanjura fit into the picture there, though.

However, one thing was clear: The key to all this was that man, Mussel.

Nail had in all likelihood seen Mussel's face when he came into The Sledgehammer, pretending to be a customer. Maybe he was underestimating the matter and figuring he would never be identified as long as he just remained in the castle town, but if I could just inform Zasshuma, then it should certainly be possible to have Melfried make a move.

"Then Diel, if you happen to get a chance to make it to the post town, could I have you tell them about that Mussel guy too? If so, my allies may be able to get him indicted as a criminal."

"Got it. I promise. But what about Lefreya...? The next time I see her, I may end up shouting my head off."

"Ah, that would be dangerous. I think it would definitely be for the best if she never learns that we met like this."

"Hmm, but I think she'll probably start bragging about you before long. Like saying how she got a hold of the chef that I'm so fond of."

"Huh? Wouldn't doing that be like admitting to the kidnapping?"

"But she could hide that part and just say she was paying you or whatever, right? At the very least, I don't see her just staying quiet, considering her personality."

So, she was reckless enough to cause her own downfall, huh?

Whether that would create the gap in their armor we needed was up in the air, but at least for now, she certainly seemed to be making bad moves.

"I guess it would help if our stories matched up in that case... but what's most important is definitely getting a message to the post town. So for that reason, it would be best to remain as cautious as possible."

"Ugh, got it. I'll try to bear it as much as I can. After all, I'm the whole reason things ended up this way. I really am sorry, Asuta..." Diel said, once more looking dejected.

I was no longer able to wring out a smile at this point, but I at least gave her a firm pat on the shoulder.

"Stop apologizing over and over like that. And now that I know you'll be

eating it too, from now on, my cooking won't feel quite so futile and empty."

"Yeah... I'm glad I get to eat your cooking too, Asuta," Diel replied with a bashful smile and a nod.

I grabbed hold of the window, then after checking to make sure there weren't any guard dogs or sentries prowling about, I repeated my rock climbing adventure in reverse. Once I pulled my sweat-drenched body back into the room, I found Chiffon Chel in the same position atop the bed, looking at me with a gentle gaze.

"It seems we meet again, Sir Asuta..." she said with a smile after I freed her mouth and arms. "I hope my saying so does not make you feel badly, but I am glad to see you return..."

There were all sorts of people here in this manor, too. And perhaps only a few of them were rotten to the core.

But even so, my heart was full of sadness, suffering, and a sense of powerlessness.

Two and a half months had passed since I had come here to this world... and I was finally spending a night apart from Ai Fa.

Just what was she thinking as this night passed?

As I stared out at the pale moon through the window, I desperately tried to hold back the crushing pain in my chest.

Chapter 3: Enduring the Days

1

And so, I ended up greeting the morning within the stone walls of this manor.

It was now the sixth day of the white month.

If things had proceeded normally, today would have concluded my fourth round of contracts for the stalls. And I was supposed to head to The Westerly Wind after work to discuss business with Yumi's father, but I had broken that promise too.

On top of all that, I was scheduled to take a two-day break starting tomorrow, and was going to sell both The Sledgehammer and The Great Southern Tree a large quantity of giba meat so they could cover the gap.

Since I was being held captive, I had no way of knowing how those business deals had turned out. Had the members of the Ruu clan carried out the deliveries in my place...? Or were they all too busy to worry about something like that at this point?

Nail had surely reported my abduction to the guards. However, I couldn't imagine that alone would be enough to make them search within the walls of the castle town. And that went even more so for the manor of a noble as influential as Cyclaeus.

I didn't figure there would be any evidence left in the post town linking the crime to that scheming noble, either. Even if they were thinking, "This is definitely Cyclaeus's doing!" they had no way to prove it. Plus it actually *wasn't* Cyclaeus himself behind things, but his daughter Lefreya, which only complicated matters further.

I had entrusted Diel with my one sliver of hope, but I figured that had very little chance of actually bearing fruit. Though we were close personally, Diel was still a child of a wealthy family, and her priorities were ordered accordingly.

Ultimately, I spent the night stuck somewhere between being asleep and awake, worrying all the while and failing to come up with any ways to escape the manor or persuade Lefreya before the sun rose.



“Well then, let us head to the kitchen...”

My first task of the day when the morning bell for the third hour chimed out was preparing a snack for Lefreya.

I was also to cleanse myself before work, and so I was dragged to the bathhouse early in the morning. After firmly refusing Chiffon Chel’s assistance, I went ahead and washed up in the steam bath.

Then I changed into a brand new chef’s uniform and we headed to the kitchen, where Roy was once more the only one awaiting me.

“You’re supposed to use panam honey for the snack,” he said with a sulky look.

He seemed even more displeased than yesterday, and he wasn’t so much as looking me in the eye. He was probably holding a grudge against me over that whole incident with Chiffon Chel.

“Panam honey’s that sweet stuff, right? So she’s requesting a dish that brings that sweetness to the forefront, huh?”

“Lady Lefreya loves sweets more than other types of cooking. And so, she always wants one for her midday snack,” Roy responded, looking away. Apparently he had heard that his employer’s name had already been revealed.

Still, I was a bit dumbfounded at the fact that I’d be making sweets this time around.

Despite my various worries, I had prepared myself to meet her demands head on and hold nothing back in terms of my cooking. Though I really doubted her honesty, Lefreya had declared that if I made a dish that satisfied her she would not only give me a silver coin but also release me. And I had absolutely no intention of throwing away the only fleeting hope I had.

However, sweets-making was a whole different matter entirely. Whether or

not I gave it my all, this was just entirely out of my field of expertise.

“Hmm, I don’t know anything about this worl—... Er, about sweets here in Genos. Would making up some sweet fuwano batter and adorning it with honey and fruit work?”

I didn’t get any response to that question.

It felt even more uncomfortable here in the kitchen than it had yesterday.

Having no other options, I decided to scrounge around the pantry while relying on my memory.

I had already investigated a variety of ingredients back in the post town in my attempts to develop new dishes. And in the process, I learned that there were not only vegetables available, but also fruits. As a result, I finally came across the sheel fruit, which had a taste similar to a lemon.

However, I didn’t see any use for sheel at this particular moment. So instead, I picked out some fruit I didn’t know the name of that was small and bright red like a strawberry, but grew in bunches like grapes.

“What is this fruit called?”

“An arow...”

Arow, huh?

Though not quite as much as sheel, it was still definitely sour. It felt something like a mix between a strawberry and blueberry on that front, and though it had a rather nice flavor to it, it was low on sugar.

They didn’t show up in the post town all that often, so as far as I remembered, the only place I occasionally saw them was at Granny Mishil’s little shop, where I always went to buy chatchi and gigo. From what I heard, it was a fruit only sold to folks who liked how it changed the taste of fruit wine when it was mixed in.

“With fuwano, you knead in water and then bake it, right?”

Roy just gave back a silent nod.

From what I was told, the lady of the house was to have her snack when the

sun hit its peak, which gave me around three hours to prepare it. And during that time, I needed to bake fuwano for the first time ever.

As I suppressed the empty feeling in my chest, I went ahead and moved some fuwano flour into an appropriate bowl, then brought it back to the kitchen along with the necessary ingredients.

The fuwano was powdery, like cake flour, and as I added water bit by bit, it got nice and sticky. In fact, it was surprisingly even more viscous than powdered poitan. While it was still rather floury, I stopped adding water and molded it freely, at which point it had a mochi-like feel to it.

Yeah, this stuff really is a different ingredient than wheat flour.

For the time being, I went ahead and made up a nice flat shape that would be easy to heat through, then cooked it up as a sample.

And so I was able to successfully prepare some cooked fuwano, which I had only had a few times. It was denser and doughier than poitan, closer to naan. This was the same sort of stuff the kimyuus manju Tara and I once ate was made out of, wrapped around cooked meat and a variety of vegetables, with nenon being the main one.

However, something like that definitely wouldn't be a sweet. Utilizing my memories from my distant home to their fullest, I added karon milk to fuwano flour, then mixed in sugar and kimyuus eggs as well.

And when it came time to cook it up, I used karon milk fat. Needless to say, I had decided to prepare them like hotcakes.

This was actually my first time tackling kimyuus eggs, too. Their shape was more or less the same as a hen's egg, but they were a size smaller. I'd put them at about the same size as a Silkie fowl egg in terms of what I had eaten back in my old world.

When I went ahead and timidly cracked one open, a lemon-colored yolk and transparent egg white fell atop the plate. And once again, the shape was pretty much the same as with a hen's egg.

I had heard a kimyuus was some sort of bizarre bird with wings growing out of its head, but fortunately for me, both its meat and eggs bore a striking

resemblance to those of an ordinary chicken.

At any rate, I went ahead and tackled cooking them.

I quickly found some thick wooden skewers, so I used those in place of long chopsticks to beat the kimyuus egg.

I haven't made hotcakes since Reina bugged me till I made them.

Was that back in our first year of middle school? My childhood friend Reina had asked me to show her how to prepare hotcakes, since she wanted to make them for Valentine's Day.

I declined and said she just had to follow the instructions off the back of the package, but she angrily retorted, "I'm asking you because that wasn't working out!" But in the end, we followed those same instructions and they turned out fine. Ultimately the problem wasn't with them, but rather with Reina's handling of the heat.

And once she had successfully cooked those hotcakes, Reina decorated them with whipped cream and chocolate sauce, then treated me and my old man to them.

After that, she really polished up her skills at making sweets, while my old man and I fell into the role of the ones eating them. Looking back on it, we always had the better cooking skills, so it must have made Reina really happy to hear the two of us praise how delicious they were.

Ack, this is no time to be reminiscing...

My thoughts were already racing about Ai Fa and everybody at the forest's edge, so if I started thinking about my old man and Reina on top of that, I was likely to cause my poor heart to break down.

Clearing all the intrusive thoughts from my head, I mixed the fuwano with kimyuus eggs, karon milk, and Jagar-made sugar, then poured the result into the handled pot that looked like a frying pan and started cooking.

Since there wasn't any baking powder to be had, it didn't puff up quite as much as a hotcake. But thanks to the eggs it was still plenty soft, plus it had a yellowish color to it in the end, making it look pretty close to a pancake overall.

When I gave it a bite, I found it had a truly gentle flavor.

Sure enough, they were chewier than I'd like thanks to the lack of fluffiness, but it had been some time since I had any sugar or eggs, and they tasted absolutely wonderful when fried up with milk fat. The saltiness from the milk fat really helped the sweetness stand out, rather than hindering it in any way, fortunately.

At any rate, I went ahead and cooked up a number of samples, adjusting the ratios of the ingredients in each one. After about 30 minutes of experimenting, I had something I was satisfied with.

However, I was serving this to a spoiled noble girl who was used to gourmet cooking. And so, I felt more than a little uneasy at the thought of just pouring panam honey on top and calling it a day.

In the end, I decided to make jam out of the arow fruit I had procured. Though I had no experience with the process, I knew it was possible to get something close enough by boiling it down and mixing in sugar. As I started by washing off the fruit and then adding water to a small pot, I turned toward Roy for the first time in a while.

"By the way, how many will be—" I started, only to suddenly trip over my words. That was because Roy was staring at my hands with a startlingly serious look in his eyes.

However, he soon noticed my gaze and looked away.

"I need to know many will be eating the snack, right?"

"Just one..."

Apparently Lefreya was the only one who would be snacking this time. Diel and her father must have been away from the manor doing business.

Still... just what was that look in Roy's eyes about?

Well, whatever. It's in our best interest not to interfere with one another.

I plucked up the freshly washed arow and boiled it in a small amount of water, and soon a bittersweet fruit aroma overcame the smell of milk fat and filled the kitchen.

After I coarsely chopped it and stirred it with a wooden spatula, I then went ahead and added some sugar.

Jagar-made sugar was similar in appearance to light brown sugar, had larger grains than caster sugar, and a rather smooth flavor. It was a real rich sweetness, like it included all sorts of minerals.

At any rate, I added sugar bit by bit, then carefully stirred it. It seemed like it was going to burn midway through, so I also went ahead and added just a bit more arow fruit, too.

It had been rather sour to start with, and so it took quite a bit of sugar to sweeten it up. But that left it feeling somehow lacking, so I cut the flame and added some panam honey.

In the end, it came out rather thick, with a brilliant sheen, and delightfully flavorful. For an improvised jam recipe, it really had turned out well.

“Alright, this seems like it’ll work out. But I’d like to present it freshly baked instead, so I’d prefer to cook up the actual dish itself closer to when the sun hits its peak.”

“I see... Then head on back to your room. I’ll be using this kitchen in the meantime.”

“Oh, so you’re making food for the servants?”

In that case, I guess I had to yield the space to him.

“Ah, but before I go, how much of the leftover karon milk is fresh enough that it’ll last till tomorrow?”

“Karon milk? We replace it with fresh stuff every morning. So anything here should be good for another two or three days.”

“Oh, really? In that case, would it be alright to borrow a few bottles in advance to prepare for tomorrow?”

Roy shot me a suspicious glance.

“Do as you please. But what are you even going to use that much milk for, anyway...?”

“Well, I figured if I’m going to be asked to make sweets again tomorrow, I’d need to do something a little extra. And so I was planning on preparing something related to milk fat.”

Since I was granted permission, I went ahead and brought two bottles out of the pantry and emptied the contents into a pot. And since each one seemed to have over a liter packed inside, it made for quite a bit. At any rate, though, I placed a lid over the rippling white milk inside and bid it farewell.

“Now I’d just like to keep it in the pantry where it won’t be disturbed.”

“That’s the extent of your ‘preparations’...?”

“Yes. If you leave it be, the liquid and fat will separate, right? The fat’s the ingredient that I’m after.”

That separated fat was, in fact, cream. Your ordinary cow’s milk sold in stores back home was refined so that the fat wouldn’t separate like that, but with raw milk it should be plenty easy to make the stuff.

As an aside, by fiercely beating that freshly harvested cream in order to further separate out the fat, it would be possible to make butter. I figured that was how the milk fat produced in this kitchen was made.

I didn’t know how much practical use cream had in a place without refrigerators like Genos, but if I whipped it and mixed in sugar, it should certainly serve for adorning sweets. That was the thought running through my head as I reached down for the pot to go carry it, only for Roy to suddenly draw nearer.

“Who in the world are you, really...?” he asked, a strange glint in his brown eyes. And his oval-face with scattered pimples had a desperate look on it, somehow. “Why does a kid like you know all those different cooking techniques? Aren’t you just some brat playing at being a chef out in the post town?”

“Yes. However, I wasn’t actually born here in Genos. And in my home country I assisted my father, who was a chef.”

“But you’re still just a kid...! How old are you, anyway?”

“I’m seventeen.”

“Seventeen... How can someone that young make a dish like that...?”

Those words actually took me a bit off guard.

“Um, did you perhaps eat my cooking?”

“Lady Lefreya and the guests all said that the dish you made was tastier than the one prepared by the sous-chef... You really think I could go without tasting it after something like that?” Roy made a move like he was about to grab me by the collar, but he pulled his hand back midway and instead lightly slammed his fist down atop the work station. “The head chef accompanied the master of the house to Genos Castle. But even the sous-chef is a first-rate cook who had once been in charge of the kitchen at Selva’s Spear. We’re all well aware of just how skilled he is. The idea that someone like you is a better chef is utterly ridiculous...!”

“I was born overseas. It’s possible my foreign cooking methods just seem novel because of how different they are.”

“Hmph! We’ve had plenty of first-rate chefs from Sym and Jagar summoned here! However, their cooking never got praised *that* highly. So why is it that you —”

“In that case, perhaps the cooking of my homeland just happens to suit the tastes of this land’s people?”

Or maybe it really was the fact that the cultural level had advanced further back in my own world, meaning cooking techniques had also evolved in turn.

I had no way of truly comparing, though, so all I could do was guess.

“Even I trained at The Maiden in White! And I’m still just 19, too! No one else has been invited to work here at this manor at such a young age up till now!”

“Right...”

“And yet I’m only ever permitted to make food for the servants. Because I’m still ultimately just a novice. That’s only logical, since I can’t measure up to the skills of any of the other chefs working here in this manor. And yet, you...” Roy suddenly cut off his rant and hung his head as his shoulders trembled ever so

slightly. “Hurry up and clean up that pot... It’s an eyesore.”

“Right.”

Though I was a bit taken aback, I went ahead and earnestly obeyed.

And at the same moment, the door to the kitchen opened from the outside.

“Sir Asuta, Sir Roy, is something the matter...?”

“It’s nothing! Get out of here, you damn slave woman!”

The soldiers were also shooting sharp glares from behind Chiffon Chel. Were they worried we were having some sort of fight again?

“Do you not yet have need of my services to test for poison...? If Sir Asuta is finished with his work, then I can once more escort him back to the room...”

“No, I plan on finishing my dish just before the sun hits its peak. Would it be possible to remain in this kitchen until then?”

Those words earned me a glare from Roy.

“I won’t get in your way. But please, let me practice my cooking, too. I normally do that each day when I’m at home. It’d be alright if I used just a bit of ingredients, right?”

“Do as you please...” Roy ground out as he started two large pots of water boiling.

As I moved the pot of karon milk to the pantry and brought back various vegetables and herbs, I stole a glance at his work. I was honestly just a bit interested in Roy’s cooking skills, to be honest.

Of course, a chef in the castle town had nothing to do with me. In fact, once I overcame this plot, we would probably never meet again.

But if I was going to keep on cooking here in Genos, then I was certain observing other chefs would prove helpful to me in some way. It was a reconnaissance of sorts on the enemy, so that I could make food in the settlement at the forest’s edge and post town that wouldn’t lose out to stuff from the castle town in the least.

And so, as I experimented with how to cook each of the herbs and vegetables,

I also observed Roy as he worked out of the corner of my eye.

He really wasn't just all talk, as his skills at cutting meat and vegetables were splendid. He swiftly and finely sliced the chatchi, pula, and nenon, then added them one after another into the boiling pots. Just how many people was he cooking for, exactly? It was just supposed to be for a snack, but that was quite a lot of food.

Then he added in rock salt, that pseudo-bouillon stuff, and some herb I didn't recognize. Though I didn't know what the herb was, it was giving off the smell of wild watercress.

What really shocked me, though, was that he even added in milk fat. He added half a jar the size of the palm of my hand into each of the pots. That certainly was one heck of a cooking method, there.

And then came the meat. It was an unfamiliar ingredient to me again, a red block of meat with plenty of fat on it. In total, it looked to be around ten kilos worth.

"Sorry, but is that perhaps karon torso meat?"

"It's karon back meat..."

Since karon had a similar taste to beef, would that make it sirloin? At any rate, Roy cut that meat hunk into slices one centimeter-or-so thick, then furthermore cut them into five centimeter wide squares.

He then fried those up in a pot along with karon fat, adding in an entirely different herb from before, stems and all. This one had a stinging, spicy smell to it. Once they were good and cooked, he removed just the herbs, then added the rest of the contents into the pots with the vegetables, fat, and meat juices included.

I figured that was the end, but he then left the pots boiling away and headed once more into the pantry. And when he returned, Roy was holding two totos eggs. Those massive eggs were each about the size of a football, and they looked to weigh around 1.5 kilos or so.

After placing those on the work table, he then grabbed a strange cooking implement from the wall. It was like a metal pole with a bulbous, rounded end.

The length was 20 centimeters, and it was three centimeters thick. And honestly, I had no clue what it was for.

Ultimately, he took the end of it and whacked it down on the top of one of the eggs. Though he definitely put some force behind the blow, it was still only enough to cause fractures to run through the shell.

And once those fractures reached a certain size, he moved to tapping with the tool. Shockingly, even once fragments of the shell started falling atop the table, the thin film inside hadn't even broken.

Then once around a quarter of the top of the shell was cleared away, he cut an opening in that soft, wobbly film with a knife. With that, he was *finally* able to pour out the contents of the egg into a fresh pot.

The yolk was a brilliant color close to orange, while the egg white was transparent. After breaking that yolk with a wooden spatula, he poured it into the boiling pots without beating it. Instead, he saved the stirring till after it was in the pots.

Meat, vegetables, and totos eggs. A large amount of milk fat, and a watercress-like herb. He stirred the pot full of all those harmonious ingredients with a ladle, then took a taste with a small wooden spoon. Apparently it didn't need any further seasoning, as Roy just silently lowered the stove's flame.

I figured with that he had to finally be done, but then he brought in a large bag of fuwano flour. It seemed to be fairly full, so there had to be around ten kilos or so in there. As he staggered and carried it along, his footing seemed a little unsteady.

He roughly scooped some out using a metal bowl, added water, and kneaded it thoroughly. The shapes he was making were round, and about the size of ping pong balls. And he was doing this super quickly, too. In no time at all, there were an incredible number of fuwano balls on the large tray sitting atop the work table.

My rough estimate put it at around 200 of them, and he plopped them one after another into the pots so that the soup didn't spill out. With *that* he was finally finished.

Roy added a lid on the pot and after enough time had passed, he gave it one more taste test before glancing over at the closed door. It was at that point that I finally spoke up.

“Is it finished? Um, would it be alright if I had a taste?”

Since he had also tasted my cream stew, that shouldn't have been asking too much. Roy's expression showed just a moment of hesitation, but it soon tightened up and he took a step back from the pot. And so, I took up a fresh wooden spoon and moved into the space he left.

It was certainly bubbling away nicely. But thanks to all the milk fat he had added, there was a fatty film stretched over top despite the fact that he had stirred it. And it had a really unique aroma to it, thanks to the mix of milk fat and herbs.

But when I gave it a bite, I found that the flavor really wasn't half bad.

The stock oozed naturally out of the vegetables, and then there was the deliciousness from the pseudo-bouillon, and the intertwining of the milk fat and watercress-like herb, plus the taste of the grilled meat on top of that. And though what I had eaten was just a spoonful of soup, the bit of totos egg mixed in added a lumpy texture from the yolk and a smoothness from the egg white.

At any rate, it was definitely an incredibly complex taste. However, it also certainly wasn't one I hated. It just didn't resemble any dish I had ever had before, so I didn't know what to compare it to.

If it were me, I would have gone with something simpler. The use of milk fat was a bit too much of a dynamic element, and I couldn't help but worry about the nutritional value. However, I could also keenly tell this wasn't just some haphazard concoction.

To create this flavor, he must have carefully selected the herbs and vegetables used, adjusted the amount of heat until just right, and tasted it again and again. I really could sense just how much effort went into it.

“It's delicious. I really don't think I could ever come up with such a combination of ingredients,” I threw out there, which caused Roy to break out in a rather complex expression in response.

Ultimately, though, he just clicked his tongue one last time before yelling out, “Hey!” at the door. “The dish for the servants is done! Let everyone on duty know!”

Chiffon Chel peaked inside upon hearing that and politely responded, “Understood...” Apparently that dish didn’t require testing for poison. “What about you, Sir Asuta...? There is not that much time left until the sun hits its peak...”

“Oh, really? I guess I’ll get mine together too, then.”

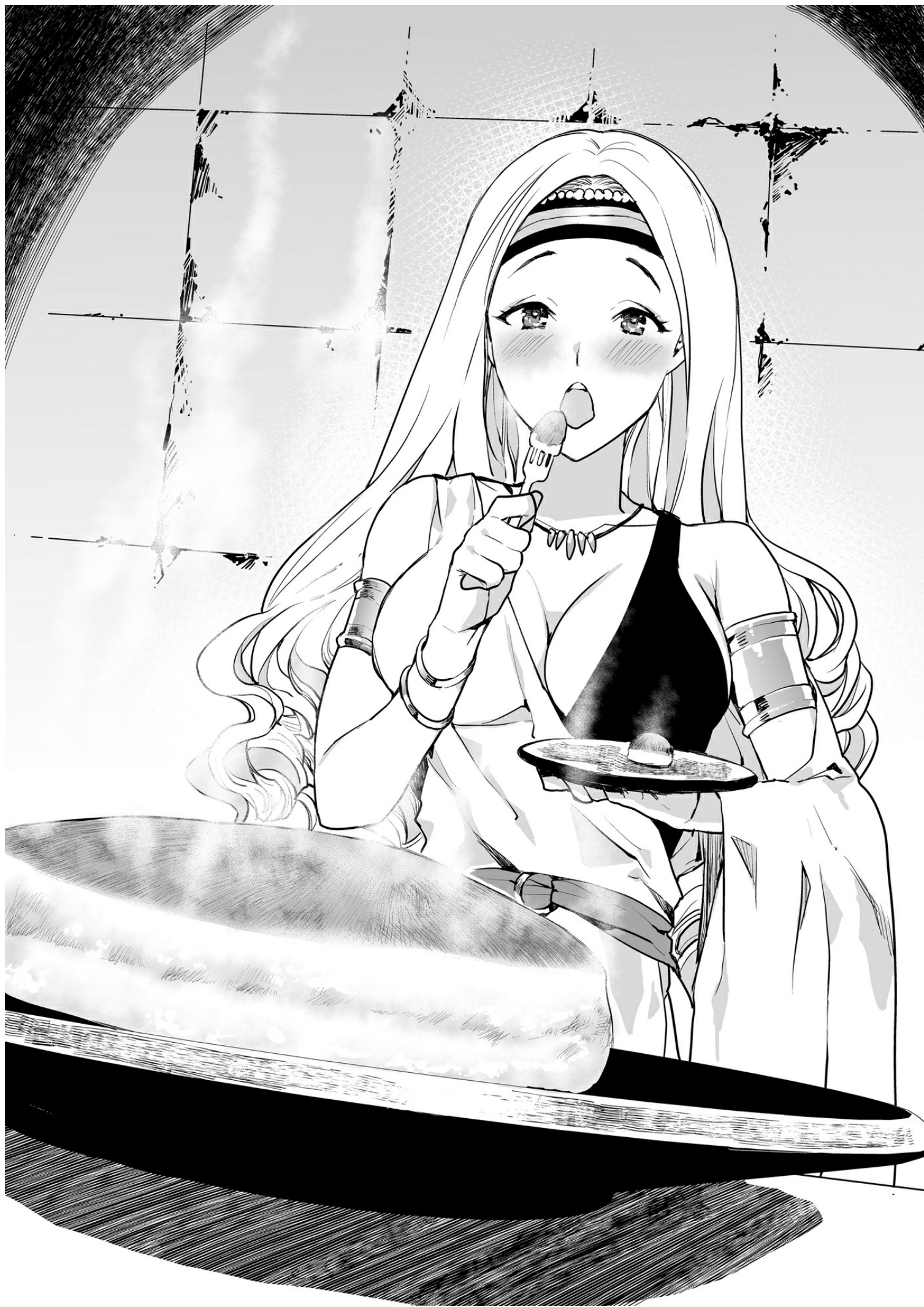
I went ahead and dropped the casually completed batter into the flat pan, then set about frying up my pancakes. Ultimately, I made two of the little fuwanocakes, each around a centimeter thick and 15 in diameter.

Once those were a nice golden brown, I stacked them atop a white clay plate. And then I added panam honey, arow jam, and karon milk fat as a butter substitute each to their own silver ramekin to go alongside the dish.

“Well then, allow me to test for poison...” Chiffon Chel stated.

Roy gave a nod in response, and cut a small portion out of the edge of the stacked fuwanocakes. Then, he moved that to a separate plate and added the three toppings with a wooden spoon. And somehow, he felt more respectful toward the dish and gentle with it than he had been yesterday.

Chiffon Chel carefully brought each bite to her mouth, letting out a satisfied “Ah...” after chewing. “It is truly delicious... The panam honey and fuwano pair so smoothly, and the flavor of the egg is simply wonderful...”



Now that I thought about it, by testing for poison day in and day out like this, the variety of dishes Chiffon Chel must have tasted had to be just as great as her masters.

Even if it was just one bite at a time, her palette must have naturally grown more and more refined. And so, receiving such compliments from her really might have been quite an honor.

“By the way, you have not eaten anything at all since last night, have you, Sir Asuta...? How about eating a snack once the sun hits its peak...?”

“Right, well I’m already plenty full from tasting the fuwano, so just pecking at something should be plenty for me. If it’s alright, could I actually stay here in this kitchen and continue to experiment with my cooking?”

“Hey, this space is reserved for me during this time, you know,” Roy interjected in a tone devoid of emotion.

He must have been planning on training his cooking skills, too.

“I’ll take care not to get in your way. It shouldn’t be hard for two people to prepare food at the same time in a kitchen this huge, right?”

Personally, I’d rather spend the whole day here in this kitchen rather than returning to that brick room with nothing to do. And I’d find it intolerable to not polish up my cooking skills and at least bring something back from this whole ordeal.

Roy looked seriously annoyed, but even so, he still answered, “Do as you please.”

2

It was now past noon.

The designated ingredients for dinner this time around were kimyuus meat and eggs.

Eggs definitely gave me more options to choose from than karon milk, at least. From numerous dishes I narrowed my candidates down to omelettes or

oyakodon, and ultimately ended up choosing the former.

I could make most of a dish of oyakodon with no trouble at all under the circumstances, but it would just feel far too lacking without an ingredient to substitute in for rice. And honestly, I just didn't feel like choosing a dish I would personally find dissatisfying.

And so, a kimyuus omelette it was.

With meat, aria, and milk fat around, this one wouldn't be hard to make, either. As for the variety, I decided on making one with plenty of ground meat.

That alone didn't sound all that interesting, though, so I focused on devising something special for the sauce. My plan for now was to try making it with two varieties, tarapa and white sauce, and see how that turned out.

For the white sauce, the process was the same as it had been yesterday. And so, I focused my time and effort on making the tarapa sauce.

If I went with a taste similar to ketchup, it wouldn't harmonize properly with the white sauce. So for this time around, I tried aiming for something closer to a demi-glace or brown sauce.

First up, that meant frying fuwano flour and milk fat to make a roux. Unlike with the white sauce, this time around I heated up the fuwano thoroughly until it browned. And as that temporarily cooled, I set about creating the stock to help dilute the roux.

I started by finely dicing up my tomato substitute, the tarapa, and then grated the aria I was using in place of onion. As I simmered those alongside the fruit wine, I went ahead and adjusted the taste with salt, sugar, pico leaves, and pseudo-bouillon.

Though I wavered for a bit, I ultimately decided to try karon milk to replace the moisture that slipped away. The tarapa from the pantry here were a good bit sweeter than the ones sold in the post town, but I was still driven to suppress their sourness further. So, I used the tarapa as the main ingredient to make up a mellow stock, then used that to dilute the roux from before, which got it pretty close to the reddish brown appearance I expected of brown sauce, at least. And when I gave it a taste, the level of sourness was just right, meaning

it really had turned out quite well. That owed a lot to the pseudo-bouillon, as just tossing it in was enough to greatly increase the depth and richness of the flavor.

If I rely on it too much, that could cause me some trouble when I go back to working in the post town...

That pseudo-bouillon was made by boiling down meat, bone, and vegetables. It really was an exceptional ingredient, but it would surely prove difficult to recreate in the post town. The cost of the base ingredients alone was nothing to scoff at, and when you added in the boiling time and the need to gather all that firewood, I just couldn't see turning a profit while using it.

But if we were talking giba bones, I could get a hold of as many as I needed. And it may be possible to make something similar to it by borrowing some help from clans whose women have time on their hands...

And so, I went ahead and made a note of that in the back of my mind.

Would it be possible to purchase karon milk in the post town, too? If so, could we make our own milk fat and dried milk? How much did kimyuus and totos eggs cost, and were enough being produced to use in my business? And if they were, why hadn't I seen them in any kitchens in the post town up till now? Also, what were the distribution channels and costs like for reten oil, mamaria vinegar, Jagar-produced sugar, honey, and the like?

I had only been here for 24 hours or so, but my mental memo pad was already full of so many crucial questions.

There's no reason for nobles to be able to monopolize all that delicious food. I've really got to turn at least something from this whole disaster into a positive in the future, I thought to myself as I finally set about starting the omelette.

The process itself was exceedingly simple. After grinding down the kimyuus breast finely, I fried it up together with diced aria, nenon, and pula. And naturally, I went with salt, pico leaves, pseudo-bouillon, and fruit wine for the seasonings.

Once that was done, I poured the eggs into the flat-handled frying pan-looking tool. I mixed in just a bit of karon milk, and used milk fat in place of

cooking oil.

Since it was apparently safe to even eat kimyuus eggs raw, I only half-cooked them so they came out nice and fluffy. Once the eggs were good and soft I added in my pre-prepared ingredients, then flipped the back half over on itself. Handling omelettes had been one of my specialties back at the Tsurumi Restaurant.

After moving the completed dish to a plate, I went to pour the tarapa and white sauce on the right and left sides, but then I remembered the poison testing.

If that happened after I added the sauce, it'd really make a mess of the presentation. And so, it seemed best to offer the sauces on the side in separate ramekins, like I had done with the fuwanocakes.

"I'm ready. Please, go ahead and check it for poison."

Roy then cut off a chunk from the right of each of the three omelettes, then poured the two types of sauce over top.

And as Chiffon Chel took a bite, she once more let out a sigh of, "Aah... At this point, I no longer have words to describe it. All of your dishes are so mysterious, Sir Asuta... And delicious too, of course..."

Since I didn't get to see that spoiled little lady or Diel eating it, Chiffon Chel's impression was everything to me.

However, I had another thought at this point. Whether it was the omelette or the fuwanocakes, there was always a bit missing from somewhere thanks to the poison testing. Just how did that make Lefreya feel when she ate them? On top of that, when her father or guests weren't around, she always had to eat alone.

Food made for just one person, that had to be tested for poison first... No matter how high quality the ingredients used or how renowned the chef that made it, could such a thing truly be tasty?

I guess being a noble isn't all sunshine and roses...

At any rate, the pages once again solemnly carried off tonight's dinner.

I used the opportunity to ask the soldiers on guard duty if I could have

another meeting with Lefreya, but the response that arrived after the sun set was, “No.”

“Today’s cooking was not bad. If you continue to strive to the best of your ability, you will be returned home before five days are up with a reward, as promised. That is what I was told to convey.”

“But I’ve got my own life to worry about, too! I mean, couldn’t you at least let me properly arrange to take a few days off work in the post town and prepare to come here to cook, with full understanding from the people of the forest’s edge?” I argued, but unsurprisingly all I got back was another, “No.”

On top of that, the pages had removed the curtains I had torn up last night while I was in the kitchen, and they hadn’t been replaced, which meant I no longer had any means of contacting Diel.

So I’ve got no options left but to keep on cooking, huh...?

As I prepared to spend yet another lonely night in this place, I couldn’t help but wonder where exactly I’d made a misstep to end up in this predicament.



The seventh day of the white month had dawned.

For the day’s snack, I was instructed to use minmi fruit.

This was an ingredient that was completely and utterly unfamiliar to me. The fruit was around the size of a tennis ball, and had little one centimeter long skin-colored hairs growing out of it wildly, giving it a rather unusual appearance.

From what I was told, it was apparently an incredibly rare ingredient that had to be imported from fairly far south in Jagar. As I wondered just what type of fruit it was, I timidly peeled back that eerie skin and revealed the juicy pink flesh inside.

There was a sweet aroma wafting gently through the air, and when I gave it a bite, I found it tasted pretty similar to a peach. It wasn’t sour in the least, and just had a mild sweetness to it. And it certainly was juicy like a peach too, with the nectar-like liquid gushing forth when I bit into it.

I figure tasty fruits are best just eaten as is... I thought to myself as I went

ahead and tried out a variety of things with my small sample.

Just mashing it and adding sugar alone was enough for me to make a rather excellent sauce, but ultimately I decided to take the texture into account too. And so, I went ahead and boiled down some of the stuff I had mashed, then added sugar and just a touch of fruit wine with a high alcohol content, which finished it off.

Today, though, I also had the karon milk I had prepared yesterday.

Since it had been left alone overnight, the moisture and fat had separated splendidly. The fat had condensed to the surface, and even the color had turned a nice creamy white. And there was even more of it than I expected, too.

With cow's milk, there was at most four percent fat in the stuff even when raw. In that case, I would only be able to get a maximum of 80 grams from two liters of milk, and this was easily at least twice that.

Water buffalo milk's supposed to have twice as much fat as cow's milk, right? Now that I think about it, karon dried milk is like mozzarella cheese, so is the milk similar to water buffalo milk?

Well, there was certainly no issue with getting more than I expected. At any rate, I carefully scooped out as much of the fat as I could and moved it to a separate container. It came out as a pure white, sticky substance.

That was enough to make ordinary cream, but if I wanted it to be truly delicious, I needed to make it into whipped cream. And so, I transferred it into a small earthenware container, then started shaking it up and down. I didn't really have a choice there, since I couldn't find anything like a whisk even here in this kitchen.

But whipped cream got its characteristic fluffiness by mixing air into it, so this method seemed like it would also prove effective.

I got the knowledge on how to do so from somewhere completely different: the fact that when brewing a delicious black tea, it was better to use tap water rather than mineral water from a bottle, since tap water had more air mixed into it. But when you wanted to use mineral water even so, it was best to firmly shake the bottle to mix in the air.

It was a pretty haphazard application of knowledge, certainly. But though it was frustrating to admit, I had to rely on every little bit of information or experience I could scrounge up when it came to making sweets.

Umm, I'm pretty sure Reina said you have to whip it for eight whole minutes when you can't use an electric hand mixer...

How long would be proper with this method, though? If I whipped it too much the fat would separate further and I could end up with milk fat, but on the other hand, it would be nice if it was that easy to make the stuff.

And so, I went on and on thoroughly whipping that cream. Unsurprisingly, Roy looked astounded as he watched me with the same serious look in his eyes as yesterday.

According to my internal clock, I ended up going for around ten minutes, inserting a break in the middle. When I was about at the point where I'd cause myself some definite muscular pain if I kept going, I went ahead and poured out the freshly whipped contents into a metal bowl.

It had been sticky to start with, and now it trickled on out. I tried poking it with one of the wooden skewers I had been using in place of long chopsticks and found it was actually pretty dense, but not enough to be an issue. Ultimately, I'd describe it as being in a semi-liquid state.

At this point, I went ahead and added sugar, then whipped it with the wooden skewers.

Before that, though, I filled a bowl one size bigger with water and sat the bowl of cream in it. From what I could recall, even the heat from human skin was enough to melt cream back to a liquid state, so you had to keep it chilled. Even though the water was room temperature, it was at least enough to give me a bit of peace of mind, if nothing else.

Then, after around 30 to 40 minutes of stirring, it finally started to put up some firm resistance.

"Good grief. Is that enough, finally?" I went ahead and decided to go for a taste test with some fuwanocakes that I made, which were less sweet than yesterday's. First up was the minmi sauce.

Honestly, hotcakes and peach sauce made for a rather eccentric combination, but at least to someone like me who didn't have much of a sweet tooth, it seemed plenty tasty.

As for my improvised whipped cream, it frankly felt a bit lacking on its own.

But that mellow fluffy sensation would probably be quite novel here in this land, and since I had used flavorful karon milk as the base ingredient, it shouldn't come across as especially lacking when served alongside panam honey.

And so, I added honey and milk fat alongside those options again today, to be combined however the recipient pleased. And from Chiffon Chel's expression when she checked for poison, it had come out at least as well as yesterday.

Without getting a hold of sugar or karon milk, it won't be possible to make proper sweets at the forest's edge or in the post town. I sure would like to treat Rimee Ruu and Tara to some, though, I thought to myself as I watched the completed dish get carried off, and then I stood in front of the pot I had neglected all this time. It was what was left of the karon milk after the fat had been separated out.

"Now then, what should I do with this...?" I asked myself aloud, and then Roy, who had been focusing on his own work, turned my way.

"Hey, if you're going to get rid of that, then have the soldiers call for someone. Karon milk stinks horribly when it spoils, so it has to be disposed of properly."

"No, but it should last till tomorrow or the day after without going bad, right? So I was wondering if I could use it in some sort of dish."

"What could you even make with milk that's had the fat wrung out of it?"

"Even without the fat, it should still be full of plenty of nutrients. It feels like too much of a waste to just get rid of it."

Milk with the fat removed would be classified as skim milk. And in its powdered form, that would be powdered skim milk. Though that stuff didn't have all that great of a reputation in Japan, skim milk itself was something used mainly as an ingredient in sweets, as far as I knew.

However, I couldn't imagine there was a way to turn raw milk into a solid here in this world. Even copying the method they used for that pseudo-bouillon, you would need to add in salt to help preserve it, so it seemed like it would prove quite tricky.

Well, we're talking about raw milk here. It's definitely possible it isn't handled in the post town just because the stuff stores so poorly.

All these concerns were predicated on the hope that I'd someday be able to get a hold of karon milk in the post town to begin with, though. And so, I was running some simulations in my head as to how I'd apply it if I was able to purchase it for my personal use.

Since there obviously weren't any refrigerators to be had in Genos, raw milk would apparently only last for two or three days. In that case, the main use for it would be as an ingredient in milk fat and dried milk. But as I saw just now, you could only get 200 grams or so of fat at best out of two liters of the stuff.

Even though that was certainly more than I had first expected, it still left you with more than 90% of the stuff left as skim milk. And I figured that it still had a high amount of nutritional value to it, so I couldn't just go chucking it like nobles did.

I wonder if they've found a good way of using it in that Dabagg town where they sell karon...?

That might just have been another item for me to research. But for now, all I could do was try to use my own intuition to figure out how to use up this skim milk.

Alright, I guess first off is the usual method of trying it as an ingredient in soup. And I'm pretty sure Reina used skim milk to make custard cream, right? Guess I should prepare to give that a try tomorrow.

I really hadn't ever imagined the day would come where I'd be relying on my childhood friend like this.

As that painful feeling welled up in my chest, I offered thanks to my friend who I would never meet again, then set about focusing on my work.



The request for the night's dinner ended up being a dish using kimyuus meat and dried milk. Considering she had asked for kimyuus three nights in a row now, Lefreya must have really liked it.

Kimyuus meat and dried milk... So, pretty much chicken and cheese, eh...?

Since I actually had an oven on hand, I had been considering trying out an imitation pizza of sorts. But since there wasn't any such equipment at the forest's edge or in the post town, it seemed like even if I took the time to figure out how to make one in this world, I wouldn't be able to use that knowledge after all this.

If that's how things were going to be, I decided to take a somewhat wild swerve and make a piccata-like dish instead. It was a form of Italian cooking in which you covered meat in flour and egg and then cooked it.

Of course, I had never had a proper Italian style piccata, so I would be taking my old man's imitation and doing my best to copy that. And I had actually already made my own original piccata in the past for a late night snack or whatever, just not as a product to be sold.

Since I had used chicken fingers back home, I ended up selecting kimyuus breast meat here. After peeling the skin, I cut it into long, one centimeter-thick cuts like salmon fillets, then tenderized it with a wooden pole. I would be using two slices per person, which meant six in total.

After seasoning it with pico leaves, I then dropped in plenty of dried milk between the cuts of meat, as finely sliced as I could manage. Since the variety wasn't specified, I chose the richly flavored, yet firmer and easier to cut gyama dried milk.

When that was done, I beat an egg. Then I used a grater to finely shred some karon dried milk over it to a consistency close to powdered cheese, and mixed them together.

That was how the recipe I learned from my father went, but what was real piccata like? From what I had heard, I was pretty sure you were actually supposed to use veal with the dish.

At any rate, I sprinkled the fuwano flour atop the meat from before, mixed in

the dried milk and egg combo, and cooked it all up in a flat pan. Milk fat would be too heavy a flavor here, so I went with reten oil instead. Since it had a similar taste to olive oil, I figured it would go well with my self-taught piccata, which was inspired by Italian cooking.

That was enough to finish off the main dish itself.

As for the sauce I drizzled over the top, I chose the orthodox tarapa sauce I used with the giba burgers. Even back home, I ate my piccata with a tomato sauce that used a heaping helping of diced onions, so I figured a tarapa sauce using plenty of diced aria and the garlic-like myamuu should pair quite well with a kimyuus piccata.

I gave my sample a try and found that the fried and egg and fuwano flour mix gave it a nice crispy texture, while the dried milk added an exquisite bit of gooeyness.

If I could serve this dish in the post town, it would definitely earn itself quite the reputation. And as long as I could at least secure oil and eggs, it would be entirely possible to recreate there.

Gyama dried milk could only be obtained through peddlers from Sym, but that issue could be overcome if I could figure out how to make my own with karon milk. If I couldn't get a hold of reten oil, though, I'd have no other option but to use giba lard.

Ah, and I needed to consider the compatibility with giba meat, too.

Would the meat itself have too strong of a flavor for the dish?

I wouldn't know for certain till I gave it a try, but I got the feeling that it could turn out to be a real impressive dish in its own way. Not pork piccata, but giba piccata... It could do well as a snack in the post town, served wrapped up in baked poitan.

Still, frying like that in the stalls might be tricky. Maintaining the flames could be troublesome, and I feel like the flavor would decline if I made them and let them sit... I thought to myself as I set about making the actual dish for dinner. And as I devoted my brainpower to such matters, I could feel my concerns about the future start to slip away.

However, I once again didn't receive any special praise from Lefreya that day.



It was now the following day, the eighth of the white month.

And I ended up receiving a complaint from the spoiled little lady of the house first thing in the morning.

Apparently, she had said, "I will not tolerate being fed the same sort of dish three days in a row." In other words, "Prepare some other sweet than fuwanocakes."

"I'm telling you, that's really not my specialty..." I muttered, but it seemed unlikely those words would ever reach that little tyrant's ears. And since I really had no choice here, I decided to take a crack at making cookies.

The only applicable memories I had were of watching from the side as Reina made some. And so, this was even more a case of me purely imitating her work than it had been with the hotcakes.

First up came further softening the milk fat by stirring it until it entered a semi-solid state, then I kneaded in sugar and fuwano flour. I had to add the fuwano bit by bit, stirring carefully so that it didn't lump up.

Next was spreading out the freshly made dough atop a floured tray, then pounding it flat with a thick mixing rod, as if I was making soba. Naturally, there weren't any cookie cutters or the like around, so I used a small-mouthed wine glass to cut out round shapes, then tried cutting those into squares and stars and like afterwards with a knife. Then I balled up the excess dough and flattened it out again atop the tray, and once I had pushed that to its limit I just rounded up the last little bit.

It was then time to use the oven that I had neglected yesterday. It had a simple construction to it where you only had to light the fuel storage in the bottom, but I kept the flames low for now so they wouldn't burn. The one to teach me how to use it was Roy. And as for the fuel in question, it was that charcoal, which I was finally getting a chance to use.

In the meantime, I went ahead and tried making custard cream with the remaining skim milk.

First, that meant mixing together kimyuus yolk and sugar, then adding a little fuwano flour. Once it was sufficiently combined, I started pouring in the skim milk bit by bit.

Up until this point, the preparation actually felt pretty similar to how I made the cookies, just with different proportions. When it came to western-style sweets, the key ingredients really were flour, milk, sugar, eggs, and butter.

Once that batter was sufficiently soft from mixing in skim milk, I heated it up in a pot. Then, after enough of the moisture evaporated and it was nice and thick, it was ready.

It wouldn't be all that easy to reproduce, but since the karon milk and its milk fat were so rich in flavor, it certainly tasted good. Since I was well out of my field of expertise, this was about the best I could manage here.

And while all that was going on, the cookies finished baking. Once they had cooled a bit I gave one a try and found it had a nice crispness to it, and honestly it could be even easier to make these again in the future than the hotcakes.

While I was at it, I also went ahead and baked the extra batter I had prepared in case I screwed up. And while they were cooking, I made up some more of that arow jam like I had done the day before yesterday. The cookies were already plenty tasty on their own, so I figured that jam and the custard cream should be more than enough as far as toppings went.

And so, my task had come to a close.

Since I had managed to bake them all without incident, I ended up with quite a large quantity.

"Well, they shouldn't spoil all that quickly, so please feel free to take the extras for after dinner snacks or whatever," I offered as a message, but unsurprisingly there was no response back from Lefreya.



The request that came that evening was, "Make whatever, as long as it uses kimyuus meat."

Now that I thought about it, her afternoon order hadn't included any

ingredients, either.

I hadn't had a chance to talk to Diel since that first night to ask whether or not those comparisons with that famous sous-chef or whatever were continuing, so I had no clue how that little game was going.

Still, "whatever" was hard to deal with. My options were just far too vast with so many ingredients on offer.

After struggling with the issue, I ultimately decided to go with a dish I was currently experimenting with: kimyuus meatballs. I was in the process of going through some trial and error with the dish so that it could be sold at The Kimyuus's Tail.

I used kimyuus breast for the meat, and went with a simple initial seasoning of just the salt it had been pickled in to start with. After mincing it with a meat cutting knife, I went ahead and actually made them into little, flat rod shapes rather than ovals.

The issue, though, was how I would season them now.

It was at this point that I decided to try bringing in another new ingredient, the kiki fruit.

I had seen them in the past in the post town, but I had never even tasted one before now. It was a purple fruit a little smaller than a human fist, and was wrinkly like a dried persimmon. From what I knew, it was sold as portable rations for travelers, the same as dried aria.

Earlier in the day I gave one a taste and found it had a rather unique flavor, combining a light sweetness with a powerful amount of sour, reminding me a bit of a dried pickled plum.

From what I was told, this dried kiki was produced using a method that originally came from Jagar. After pickling the kiki fruit in salt and fruit wine, it was then dried out over the course of several days. And to my surprise, apparently quite a few travelers tossed it into their poitan stew before eating it.

Furthermore, it seemed heavy drinkers enjoyed it when made into a marinade. It was incredibly salty, so the normal method was to cut it with fruit wine, water, or fruit juice. It must have made for quite a unique taste, there.

At any rate, dried kiki saw frequent use in the post town too thanks to that.

Meanwhile, in kitchens in the castle town, it was employed as something of an eccentric seasoning.

As for me, well, I certainly was glad to have encountered the ingredient. After all, I had been right in the midst of searching for something to help spice up the kimyuus meatballs.

Though the skin of the kiki fruit was all parched out, the inside was still moist with juices. Just mashing it into something like a shredded dried plum dip was plenty to accompany the meatballs. In fact, I'd really like to add it as a new dish at The Kimyuus's Tail.

It was too simple for a place like this, though, so I went ahead and prepared a separate seasoning for each of the four meatballs I'd be making for each person.

For one, I fried it up with milk fat and tau oil, or what we called "butter soy sauce style" back in my old world.

With another, I used the now familiar white sauce.

And then for the last one, I went with a rather elaborate method for the sake of variety. Well, at least I could describe it that way, but it was a pretty standard method back in my old home country. That is, I would be mixing the highly alcoholic fruit wine, tau oil, pico leaves, sugar, and panam honey as a secret ingredient to make salty-sweet meatball teriyaki.

That wouldn't be all, though. No, I also went ahead and tried garnishing that meatball teriyaki with my own homemade tartar sauce. In order to make it, mayonnaise would be indispensable. However, with egg, vinegar, salt, and oil, mayonnaise was actually relatively simple to whip up.

First you mix together the yolk and salt, then you add the vinegar followed by the oil, at which point you just have to keep whipping it. That was all there was to the process.

The key point was that you had to focus on mixing in air until you added the vinegar. Since I didn't have a whisk at hand, that one point was a bit troublesome, but it wasn't that big of a deal since I was already getting used to

the inconvenience.

However, there was a bit of a discrepancy here in terms of ingredients. The reten oil was just like olive oil, while the mamaria vinegar was somewhat similar to white or balsamic vinegar in terms of flavor. And mamaria vinegar was so dark brown it was near black, so when it blended with the yolk it became a dark orange mayonnaise.

Still, despite the unusual color, it really didn't turn out half bad. Though I had my concerns about the raisin-like flavor of the mamaria vinegar, it had a proper mayonnaise taste in the end. Thankfully the sourness from the mamaria wasn't all that strong, so it was a rather mild flavor overall.

All that was left was to finely dice up a hard-boiled egg and some raw aria and then mix them together, then adjust the flavor with salt and pico leaves in order to complete my tartar sauce. When I spread that over the meatball teriyaki and gave it a try, I found that the tartar sauce drew out the rich sweet and salty flavor, making for a lavish taste that reminded me of junk food.

"This will certainly make the poison tasting difficult..." was what Chiffon Chel had to say when presented with the meal I prepared — four different varieties of meatball each for three people. She had to make a truly valiant effort to suppress her grin.

Honestly, it would have been fine to make them all up teriyaki style with tartar sauce. But after all my testing with the time allotted to me, I didn't entirely feel that version was head and shoulders above the rest. That of course applied to the butter soy sauce and white sauce ones, but I felt that even the dried kiki dip meatballs were plenty tasty too. In fact, I could see that one really standing out after tasting the rich flavor of the teriyaki meatballs.

Since I couldn't come up with a plan to slip away, all I could do was keep on cooking in the hopes of eventually breaking down Lefreya's stubbornness. Such thoughts drove me forwards, to make every dish the absolute best that I possibly could.

But in the end, I ultimately didn't hear so much as a single peep from Lefreya on that day, and my requests to talk to her were unsurprisingly turned down.

So today ended without anything happening again, huh...? I thought to myself as I stared out into the darkness through the big open window after finishing my work and returning to the room.

Before I even knew what was happening, I was heading into my fourth night here in this place.

Was Diel unable to slip out of the castle town after all? I was just stuck here passing the time in this new everyday routine thrust upon me, with nothing changing for either better or worse.

But the morning of the day after tomorrow, Cyclaeus would be returning. And so, regardless of what anyone had to say, this abnormal everyday schedule would be brought to an end. Yes, even at the most, there was only a little over a day left till this whole stupid farce was blown to smithereens.

Even so, that still felt so far away. Though I was able to suppress it somehow while holed up in the kitchen, the pain and sadness I felt seemed like it would crush my very heart.

Ai Fa... What must you be thinking...?

Whenever that name or face came to mind, my heart started beating irregularly.

It felt as if half of my body had been torn away from me. I was realizing with terribly painful clarity just how much I had come to rely on her.

Why was I even standing here? Were those really my feet there on the ground? Why am I even alive...? Such thoughts would normally never come to mind for me, but now my head was full to bursting with them. I felt as helpless as if I was adrift in space, and I was full of such despair that it was like my head had sunk deep into an inky blackness.

I wanted to see Ai Fa.

To hear her voice.

To feel the warmth from her fingers.

Even I couldn't help but see how stupid I was being to let myself get so completely caught up in such pointless, obstructive thoughts.

How had everyone else spent these last few days, too? I of course wondered about the Ruu clan, who I had the closest ties to, but also the Rutim, Lea, Sudra, Fou... so many that I couldn't even count them all.

And there were the folks from the post town, too. They all felt like distant memories to me now. It was as if I was drifting off into the sky while still alive, but was awash in my memories from life.

By immersing myself in cooking during the day, I was able to escape from such concerns. But when I was pulled back to this room, I was instantly swallowed up again by that empty, meaningless feeling. No matter how much I strove with my cooking research, that food would ultimately only end up making it to Lefreya's mouth. Even though Diel and her father got to eat the dinners too, that certainly wasn't enough to clear away that awful emptiness.

The one I wanted to serve my cooking to was Ai Fa. And the people of the forest's edge, and the townsfolk from the post town too. At some point I'd be able to unveil the skills and knowledge I gained here to everyone... That thought kept me going, giving my all as I cooked away. But at night, my decompressing emotions felt like they would crush my soul completely.

"Sir Asuta... It will not be good for you if you do not get some rest soon..." Chiffon Chel said as she gently nuzzled close.

Though she must have been touching my arm or shoulder, my senses were so dulled that I didn't feel a thing.

"Sorry, but I don't feel like sleeping yet."

"I see... But simply lying on your side should help you recover quite a bit of strength, so I beg you please move to the bed..."

"Right..."

It wouldn't impact the deep darkness welling up inside me whether I was standing by the window or lying in the bed. And so I figured it was the better choice to go ahead and at least put Chiffon Chel at ease.

“My master shall be returning the morning of the day after tomorrow... And so I shall only be able to spend time like this with you for a little over a day more at most...”

“Yeah.”

“I really cannot help but find that regrettable in the end. However... It is also quite heartrending to see you so pained, Sir Asuta...”

Chiffon Chel was wearing the same gentle smile as usual, but her mysterious purple eyes made it look to me like she was agonizing over how to properly convey her feelings.

She was someone who had been a slave for years now. Perhaps a portion of her heart had been worn down more than most in the process, but she most definitely still cared about others.

It was possible that I could have broken down even further had she not been here by my side.

Nothing could fill the huge gaping hole left open in my heart, though, despite her best efforts.

“Sorry... I’ll rest for a bit, then.”

“Of course...”

Chiffon Chel gently removed her hand from my arm, then went ahead and closed the window. After that she led me over to my bed, and then disappeared behind the folding screen.

“I wish you sweet dreams, Sir Asuta...”

“Yeah, you too,” I replied as I listlessly collapsed atop the bed.

Before long, Chiffon Chel extinguished the lantern, at which point my vision really did go completely black.

My exhausted body felt like mud, yet I didn’t feel even the slightest urge to sleep creeping in. Was my heart outright rejecting the idea? I mean, even if I slept, I was sure to just be assailed by nightmares.

Nightmares, huh...? This whole situation already is a nightmare.

If there were at least some firm proof I really would be back home two days from now, maybe I wouldn't feel so cornered. But I was up against Cyclaeus here. No matter how positive I tried to be, that man's reputation was just so deplorable that I couldn't feel even the slightest bit of hope at the thought of having to rely on him.

Of course, if I really wasn't released before he returned and ended up face to face with Cyclaeus, I would do everything in my power to try to make sure things ended peacefully. But when he learned of his daughter's carelessness, if he figured it would be quickest to just get rid of me permanently... Well, I could end up disappearing from this world entirely, never again seeing Ai Fa or anybody else. That possibility was likely the source of the terror and despair I was feeling.

If it was just a few days apart from Ai Fa then, well, I figured I could handle that much. But if it was to be our final farewell... I couldn't just die and leave things like this.

The last time I saw Ai Fa, with that joyful smile on her face... the sight of it was burned into the back of my eyelids.

I certainly hope that we can at least spend those days peacefully.

Ai Fa had seemed really happy at the thought that when our days off overlapped, we'd be able to relax together back home for the first time in quite a while. That was going to be on the eighth of the white month... In other words, today.

Keep on striving at your work, but make sure not to let your guard down.

I really didn't think I ever let my guard down. And yet I was still kidnapped by thugs and left unable to return to the Fa house. Just how angry and sad must Ai Fa be...? I must have inflicted even more suffering and despair on her than what I was feeling myself.

Ai Fa...

I tossed and turned in the bed, unable to fall asleep.

And as I did, a strange, feeble, metallic *creeeek* sound crept into my ear.

Had the wind blown the window open?

No, the windows here opened out. They weren't built crudely enough that the wind would do anything to them. However, the door to the hallway hadn't opened to allow anyone to come in.

So had Chiffon Chel opened the window, then?

But when I listened carefully, I could hear her rhythmically breathing away in her sleep.

Then what in the world was that? I thought, preparing to sit up in bed.

But then, a shadowy figure suddenly appeared from behind the partitioning screen by the window. It was even darker than the night itself, like a bundle of condensed shadows.

"Wha..."

"Don't raise your voice," a quiet, whispered voice chimed back.

It was that of a young boy, and I felt like I had heard it somewhere before.

Thanks to the faint bit of moonlight streaming in through the windows, I could see the slight yellow glow of his beastly eyes.

"You're..."

"Keep quiet. It'll be a pain if that woman sleeping there notices," the mysterious boy whispered. He had the eyes of a wounded predator, and his still youthful voice had a husky rasp. "Can you not see me? This should be plenty of moonlight, though."

With that, he firmly grabbed hold of my wrist.

I felt vaguely like I was in the midst of some sort of lucid dream as that strong grasp pulled me along to the other side of the partitioning screen. And since the window was wide open when we got there, there was plenty of moonlight streaming into the room.

Under that pale bluish light, there was burning crimson hair blowing gently in the wind.

"Jeeda... What are you doing in a place like this...?"



“Try asking yourself that,” the red haired boy Jeeda replied in a monotone voice, pushing away my wrist. “You look like you’re doing surprisingly well. Is it nice and comfortable here in this noble’s manor, Asuta of the Fa clan?”

I figured that was actually the first time Jeeda had called me by name.

His face still had the look of youth about it, he was about half a head shorter than me, and he had on a fur cloak spotted with fine specks that marked him as a hunter of Masara. This was the orphaned child of the honorable thief Goram Redbeard, Jeeda. He had an unusual appearance about him that I just couldn’t get used to, and as I looked at it now I felt myself growing more and more flustered.

“H-How in the world did you manage to sneak all the way here? I mean, it’s protected by guards and dogs and... Wait, how did you even know I was here in the first place...?”

“I already told you not to raise your voice. After all, there must be soldiers or the like keeping watch outside this room, right?” His delicate-looking face gave a displeased pout, but then his yellow eyes shot me a glare. “You had that window open until just a little while ago, didn’t you? That was how I learned that you were here in this room. Then all I needed to do was fire off a clawed arrow with fibaha vines attached to it into the roof, then use that to climb up.”

“That’s not what I meant. Nobody should know that I’m confined here in this manor to start with.”

“The people of the forest’s edge have been wailing that a noble named Cyclaeus is undoubtedly behind this... I didn’t talk to any of them directly, though. The one who mentioned the location of this manor was a man named Mikel of Turan.” I was even more taken aback to hear that unexpected name come up now. “I happened to see the people of the forest’s edge hound him when he came to the forest’s edge yesterday. I followed him when he was returning to Turan, and then asked him where this manor was. Apparently he was originally from the castle town, too...”

“Y-Yeah, that’s what I’ve heard... But the castle town is protected by stone walls, isn’t it? And you’re not supposed to be able to make it in without a pass.”

“It’s possible with the proper tools. Are you asking me to tell you my methods...?”

That didn’t matter to me at all.

“Then... Why did you come all the way here, exactly?”

Jeeda frowned when he heard that question. I was secretly grateful to see the boy make such childish expressions, actually.

“I... I just wanted to see your face, now that you’ve fallen right into the enemy’s hands after acting all high and mighty. And also...” His yellow eyes gleamed. “The owner of this manor, that Cyclaeus noble... he’s the one you all say is behind everything, isn’t he? That’s what I learned from listening to the people of the forest’s edge and Mikel of Turan. And so, I wanted to check how seriously this manor was being guarded.”

“It’s watched over by guards and dogs, right...?”

“Yeah. But it’s nothing all that impressive. That Cyclaeus man sure is lax on that front, considering all the stuff he’s done.” There was a dangerous feeling simmering in the air about the boy’s small body. There was a wild, animalistic bloodlust about him that felt no less intense than that of the people of the forest’s edge. “Well, I can sense a lot more presences inside the manor, though. And just finding his location in a building this stupidly huge would be quite an undertaking. So it wouldn’t be all that simple to take his head.”

“J-Jeeda, are you really thinking of going after—”

“He’s still out, right? I overheard the people of the forest’s edge saying so. No, today’s just a preliminary inspection...” Jeeda’s gaze then fell a bit, only for him to look back up at me. “If there’s a way to bring his crimes to light, that would be the best method for avenging my late father... I’ll wait to bring my own strength to bear till after I see whether or not you all succeed with your plan.”

“I see. In that case—”

“But if the laws of this country grant him a sentence lighter than death, then I swear I will personally send his head flying, without fail.”

It wasn’t as if he was raising his voice or shooting an angry look, but there was

still a clear tension in the air about him. However, that dangerous sensation lingering about might well have been nothing but a mere fragment of the bloodlust Jeeda was desperately suppressing.

I was facing off with that small bundle of rage in the darkness like this, just the two of us. It was just so unreal that I still felt a bit out of it, but even so, I asked, “So you came here for reconnaissance and to check on how I was doing...?”

“Yeah, that’s right. If you were the sort of guy to try to curry favor with your sworn enemy, then I was prepared to skin your face or something, but still...” the boy replied, his beastly gaze piercing through me. “Apparently, you’re just lamenting your own carelessness. You really are a pathetic man. The people of the forest’s edge would probably be exasperated if they heard about this.”

“I can’t exactly refute that, yeah. Hey Jeeda... How’s everyone from the forest’s edge doing?” I shot back, finally getting out the question I most wanted to ask.

Jeeda closed his eyes for a moment and the resentment dripping off of him calmed just a bit, then he replied, “They’re a mess, of course. They’re all running around like crazy looking for you. The whole post town’s in a wild frenzy as a result, too.”

“I... I see...”

“At first, it seemed like they might even cross blades with the guards. Now, though, they’re just running all about town. The guards in charge of the castle gates won’t pay them any heed, so they’re frantically searching around to identify the scoundrels who kidnapped you.”

I just kept on listening, not saying a word.

“A big crowd of townsfolk came after the guards too, but they just kept insisting they needed to wait till the militia captain returned on the tenth of the white month. And those guards looked every bit as out of sorts as the townsfolk, to be honest.”

If Cyclaeus’s younger brother, the head of the militia, was also stuck in the castle for the time being, then that seemed only natural. I mean, there was a very high likelihood that this was all done at Lefreya’s discretion alone.

And even if news of that commotion made it into the castle, the report would be, “A person of the forest’s edge doing business in the post town was captured by ruffians.” Since they didn’t give the orders themselves, Cyclaeus and his brother would just laugh it off. After all, it wouldn’t be bad at all for them if us people of the forest’s edge and some scoundrels from town went and got in a scuffle all on our own.

“So, um... Do you know how my clan head, Ai Fa, is holding up...?”

“That woman, huh?” Jeeda flatly shot back. “She’s apparently been heading into town every day too. But she’s a troublesome one, since she notices me no matter how much I try to hide my presence. I try to stay away from her as much as possible, so I don’t really know.”

“I see...”

Ai Fa, the other people of the forest’s edge, and the townsfolk were all desperately searching for me. Just hearing that was enough to cause a crushing sensation to weigh down on my chest.

“You don’t look to be especially injured... but you seem quite defeated, even so,” Jeeda quietly stated. “I owe you all a bit of a debt. I suppose I could deliver a single message for you, at least.”

With that, I went to draw in close to Jeeda. However, he swiftly pulled back in order to maintain the same distance between us.

“Jeeda, I know it doesn’t make any sense to ask this of you, but... Could you take me back to the post town with you, possibly?”

“Hmph. Can you eliminate your presence like a hunter? If not, you won’t make it ten steps before those dogs maul you to death,” Jeeda replied, swiftly shooting down my request.

“I see...” I said with a slump of my shoulders, only for Jeeda to glance around impatiently.

“The people of the forest’s edge would have little difficulty slipping past the guards like I did. And since they have ties to Mikel of Turan, it would certainly be possible to find out where this manor is located. And yet they’ve left you here... They must not think saving you is worth breaking the law.”

“That’s—” I started to argue, only for Jeeda to place his palm over my mouth.

“I told you not to raise your voice.”

“That’s only natural. Before they go breaking the law or anything like that, they’d need proof that Cyclaeus abducted me. And since they can’t afford to show any weakness to the man, that’s even more reason they can’t just break the law without any evidence.”

“But...”

“Besides, it actually wasn’t Cyclaeus himself who had me abducted.”

It was at this point that I finally went ahead and gave Jeeda all the details.

The boy looked clearly displeased, but he listened silently without interjecting until I was done.

“So it’s not Cyclaeus behind this, but his daughter, eh...? Like father, like daughter I guess.”

“I mean, I don’t think that’s always the case...”

“Besides, none of this changes the fact that you’re imprisoned here in this manor. So I still can’t help but see it as the people of the forest’s edge valuing the law over your life,” Jeeda said with a frown, looking seriously upset with that fact.

That childish action really reminded me of Ai Fa, which took me aback. Now that I thought about it, his wild cat-like eyes might also have been a bit similar to hers when she was angry, too.

“A comrade’s life is more important than anything else. Are the people of the forest’s edge really so pathetic that they would sacrifice one of their own for the sake of the law?”

“That’s absolutely not the case. But the people of the forest’s edge believe it’s proper to follow the law and customs. Maybe even more so than the townsfolk.”

“Hmph. So you’re saying unlike the son of a thief, their souls are unsullied?”

“No, that’s not how I see things, but—”

“Whatever. I have my own way of doing things, and so do the people of the forest’s edge. And thanks to my methods, I was able to meet you. The people of the forest’s edge, however, were not,” Jeeda said in a quiet yet confrontational tone, suddenly moving in closer. “With that in mind, let me ask... is there anything you want me to tell your comrades?”

His words and expression made it seem as if he was asking, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

But knowing nothing of what he was thinking inside, I replied, “There is,” with a nod. “I’d like you to tell everyone what I told you before. And you should let a man named Zasshuma know too.”

“Zasshuma...?”

“A townsman who’s lending the people of the forest’s edge aid. He’s the only one who should be able to get into the castle town. And so let him know that he needs to inform Melfried of this as soon as possible. Ah, Melfried is a noble who’s also trying to expose Cyclaeus’s old crimes, and is the son of Genos’s lord.”

“Got it. If Cyclaeus takes the initiative, you could be placed in danger, right? I’ll let them know.” As he said that, his mysterious yellow eyes flickered. “By the way, is that easterner named Sanjura here in this manor?”

“Huh?”

“Isn’t that man, who injured my shoulder, one of those who kidnapped you? That’s what’s written on the wanted posters.”

“Th-They put up wanted posters in the post town?”

“Yeah. I only got the personal description part, though. But yes, there are wanted posters out there saying the ones who abducted you were that Sanjura guy and an unidentified western man.”

So Nail informed the guards after all, huh?

And the contents of what he said were spread throughout the post town as he gave them, rather than being suppressed by any pressure from above.

In other words, Cyclaeus must not have been told the details yet. If he had so

much as seen the wanted poster, he would have known it was talking about men under him. And that was another light of hope for me.

“That other westerner is probably the officer assigned to guarding Cyclaeus’s daughter. His build and voice were identical, after all. His name is Mussel. You should let Zasshuma know that too.”

With that, at the very least Melfried would learn everything once he could act freely. As for what came next, it would be a question of how strong a hand he could play as an arbiter of the law. And that was one thing I wouldn’t find out until the time came.

“I’ll let them know for sure. And this settles my debt with all of you, too...”
Jeeda said, turning away.

However, I called out to him from behind, “Hold on. Can you let them know I’m doing fine, too? And... Could you tell not just Ai Fa, but as many people of the forest’s edge as possible?”

“I have trouble handling that woman so I was intending to tell someone else to start with. Still, why go to that much extra trouble?”

“Eh...? Well, um... If you just told Ai Fa, she might try to come alone like you did to rescue me...”

“So she’d break the law without even telling anyone else?” Jeeda questioned, his eyes narrowing a bit as his eyebrows raised in a peculiar manner. It was a real complex expression, like he was both astounded and impressed at the same time. “I didn’t expect you to go bragging about your woman right at the end like that...”

“S-She’s not exactly my woman or anything...”

“Still, that’s what a real comrade’s like. I figure that’s what it means to really be family,” Jeeda said, lifting his right foot up onto the frame of the window. “Well then, I’m off. We may never meet again... But for the sake of your comrades desperately running around everywhere, give it everything you’ve got to at least survive through tomorrow.”

“Right, and thanks. I really am grateful to you, Jeeda.”

With that, Jeeda disappeared beyond the window, offering no response to my words.

Though I hurriedly rushed over to look, his fur cloak disappeared into the darkness in no time flat. He must have long since collected the tools he used to infiltrate the place, as it seemed he just needed to leap down on his way back. That was some seriously astounding physical prowess, there.

After closing the window, I gave a sigh.

This time, it seemed I would definitely get my message to Ai Fa and everyone else that I was doing alright. That alone was enough to clear away a lot of the dark clouds billowing up inside of me.

Now all that leaves is getting out of here intact.

In place of my unease, anguish, and despair, I was being filled with some new, unfamiliar strength.

As I writhed in the dark, Jeeda had come and granted me the light of hope.

Ai Fa, hold on just a little longer.

After clenching my fist one last time, I returned to my bed.

I was worried I wouldn't be able to sleep after that surge of emotions, but I had no memories after that point and must have swiftly drifted off. And that night, I wasn't plagued by any nightmares.

Chapter 4: The Day of Reunion

1

And so, the ninth day of the white month had begun.

It was now my fifth morning stuck here in this manor.

No matter how things played out, this would be my final day making food for them. What awaited me next? Was it my own destruction, or a fateful reunion with my comrades...? Come hell or high water, I was determined it would be the latter as I headed to the kitchen.

“You’re not supposed to make the same sweet as yesterday or the day before,” Roy informed me.

That was quite the troublesome order. What could I make other than hotcakes and cookies?

“Hmm... Um, there’s a question I’d like to ask.”

“What is it this time?”

“Here in Genos, do people fry food in highly heated oil?”

“Fried food, is it? It’s not all that popular.”

“Ah, but it should be possible with the equipment here, right?”

Personally, I found it difficult maintaining that level of heat effectively with a firewood-fed stove. But as long as I didn’t need to worry about how much firewood I used, it wasn’t all that tough. The real tricky part was finely adjusting things to keep the fire at just the right level.

Guess it’s time for my last resort: making donuts. With this my repertoire is pretty much emptied out...

Making the batter wasn’t all that different between cake and donuts. Actually, it was more that that was pretty much all I knew how to do.

Umm, I’m pretty sure you use eggs here, too.

After mixing together kimyuus eggs, sugar, and karon milk, I added in fuwano flour bit by bit. Since I didn't know how to utilize the kind of butter they had here all that well, I made samples where I mixed in milk fat, panam honey, and both.

Next came preparing the oil. Borrowing Roy's knowledge and assistance, I went ahead and poured plenty of reten oil in a large pot. I didn't know how much the stuff cost, but this much surely wouldn't be cheap.

And then, I had to just keep on adding firewood. However, I took care not to go overboard. Since I wasn't used to heating oil with this setup, I had to be as cautious as possible.

When frying donuts, somewhere between a medium and high heat was appropriate, if my memory was correct. I waited a couple dozen seconds after the heated oil started wavering, then I stuck in one of the wooden skewers I had been using in place of long chopsticks to check the temperature based on the number and size of the bubbles produced. It made me a little uneasy knowing that the material used wouldn't be identical to the chopsticks I was familiar with, throwing things off, but even so all I could do was eyeball it.

To start with, I fried up a single small sample at a high heat for around 180 seconds or so.

After flattening out the dough into a disk shape, I slowly lowered it in, listening to it make a satisfying sizzling sound. However, it seemed like it might have been going a little slowly. Thanks to the different qualities of the oil compared to what I was used to, though, I found it hard to ascertain.

From there I increased the amount of firewood bit by bit and added in more samples one by one. And since the level of oil went down each time I added more batter, it made maintaining the temperature a truly herculean task.

Still, the volume of oil we used held back the impact of those changes, so I managed to more or less get the hang of it before I could break down whining about how hard it was. The key point was the realization that it was fine keeping it at a high flame, just not high enough so that the donuts would burn, which brought my practice to a close.

Yeah, I could make fried food with giba fat too. So this training won't be a

complete waste, at least.

The ones with both milk fat and honey had the best flavor out of the samples, so that was what I went with.

And so, I set about molding the dough once more.

With my limited knowledge on the subject, I ultimately came up with four varieties: A ring shape with a hole in the middle, a rounded ball, a straight stick shape, and one made by twisting thin little sticks around one another.

Since I was worried about them coming out raw, I went ahead and made all of them on the small side. And since there wasn't any baking powder to be had, they honestly came out pretty tough. If I made them too big, that'd probably be difficult for the pampered little noble lady of the house, since her jaw strength probably wasn't all that great.

Then the question was what to do about the toppings. I still had skim milk left to make custard cream out of, but that felt like it'd make me come across as a real one trick pony.

Ah, there were simple ones where they just sprinkled sugar on top, too.

And by melting down sugar and spreading it on top, then letting it dry, that could give it the proper taste and appearance. But at any rate, for now I had no choice but to keep trying anything and everything that came to mind.

And so, I prepared myself to set about making the real deal... Only for a sudden, serious incident to occur. When I dropped the various lumps of dough in and kept an eye on them as they fried, one of them suddenly exploded.

"Whoa!"

The scalding hot oil wildly splashed upwards. Well, honestly it wasn't all that much that made it outside of the pot, but it was enough to feel like a deadly danger when I was that up close and personal with it.

"Hot! Ah, hot!" I shouted, moving the vest away from my skin where the oil hit it. I really was lucky that it hadn't hit my exposed hands or face.

"What are you doing, you idiot!" Roy yelled, tossing a hand towel he had dipped in the water jug and then wrung out.

Without a moment's hesitation I slid that between my chest and clothing, then worked up my resolve to peer into the pot.

The one that exploded was the ball-shaped one, while the other three were sizzling away and turning a nice color.

With my long chopsticks, I went ahead and transferred them onto a wire mesh. Meanwhile, the ball-shaped one had taken on a strange form like a blooming flower as it danced about in the oil, so I fished it out too.

"Man, that was a shock... Apparently the dough expands too much on the inside with this shape, huh?"

I still didn't know for certain what had caused it, but my best guess was this disaster had been the result of that shape being the hardest one to heat through.

"I'm the one who's shocked here! Don't go getting all crazy and dangerous right at the end like that!"

"I'm really sorry," I said, turning toward Roy only to find him looking even paler than I was, with a hand gripping over his heart. Yeah, he really did look pretty darn shocked there. In fact, he was so rattled it made his face look a bit childish, and not so thorny anymore.

"It seems I was smart to make extra dough. I'll be more careful with the second batch."

"You're doing it again?! Just make something else!"

"It'll be fine. The problem must have been this rounded shape. I'll go ahead and remake it into a ring instead."

After removing the burning donut bits still left in the oil I adjusted the heat of the flames, then carefully submerged the fresh dough.

And sure enough, the disaster didn't repeat itself. Apparently the ball shape really had been the issue.

"Geez, that was bad for my heart..." Roy muttered.

If you took it as fact that someone's true nature showed in times of crisis, then maybe this young man wasn't all that bad of a guy.

But at any rate, the second batch fried without incident, and so I set about trying all sorts of different toppings. And after testing the results, I decided that for the stick-and-twist types I'd cover them in melted sugar with a bit of panam honey mixed in, while for the ring ones I went with arow jam and custard cream.

If I had a bit more time on my hands I would have liked to try making some with jam or cream inside before frying them, but I couldn't call it much of a lingering regret considering I didn't even know when I'd be making sweets again in the future.

"Ah... These also have quite the mysterious taste..." Chiffon Chel stated with great satisfaction as she tested for poison.

Tonight's dinner was now the only chance remaining for her to taste my cooking.

After she left along with the pages who delivered the food, I turned to face Roy.

"Um, would you like to try one too? I ended up making too many, after all."

The young chef didn't respond.

"I guess it was probably because they were fried in oil, but just taste testing was enough to fill me up. And since I'll need to taste my own cooking experiments I'll be making after this, I'd prefer to leave a bit of extra space in my stomach."

"If you're going to keep babbling about it, I guess I'll accept. Still, you sure are different today..."

"Eh? Really?"

"Are you all worked up because you finally get to return home tomorrow? That's the first time I've seen you make such a big mess of things, and yet you still look like you're in a really good mood."

According to Chiffon Chel, Roy was pretty much not acquainted in the least with his employer, Cycloaeus. And it seemed he couldn't even imagine the old noble would be the complete monster that he was. Which meant apparently his

impression was that even if Cyclopeus came back and realized what his daughter had done, the worst he'd do would be to send me home with some coins to keep me quiet.

As I thought to myself that I'd have nothing to worry about if that was the kind of conclusion things were heading toward, I replied, "That's not true at all. That mistake earlier was entirely due to my inexperience. After all, I'm still ultimately just a novice."

"If you're a novice, then what does that make us...?"

I was a bit taken aback at hearing such a straightforward objection.

"Umm... Whether or not a chef is fully trained comes down to every aspect of our practice taken together, judgment included, right? I mean, I carelessly charged ahead and took on a challenging task like frying when sweets-making really isn't my strong suit, and sure enough, I failed. So I'd definitely say I'm still a novice."

"Your mindset isn't even worth kimyuu's feed," Roy muttered, looking away. "In fact, having that sort of disposition won't earn you a single coin, and can even get you killed. Chefs just need to think about making delicious food and nothing else."

"Hmm, but wouldn't you say that sort of spirit is important when it comes to cooking up tasty dishes?"

"If that 'spirit' of yours leads you to go up against the wrong person, you won't be able to work as a chef at all..."

That statement of his seriously bothered me.

And it also got me thinking... Just how large was the scale of the culinary world here within the walls of Genos's castle town?

The odds that this man, the first active chef I had met, and the man who used to be one knew each other... they honestly might not have been all that low.

"However, I've got no intention of trying to cook in an environment with no spirit at all. If you told me to get used to something like that, or else become unable to ever cook again in my entire life... I'd never want to choose either."

Roy shot me an astonished look in response.

With that expression, I became near certain that my hunch had hit the mark.

In all likelihood, Roy knew Mikel... A tragic man who had his life as a chef cut short when he defied Cyclopeus's orders and paid for it by having the muscles in his arm severed.

In that case, just how exactly did Roy feel about serving under that wicked noble? I seriously wanted to ask him, but I just barely managed to exercise self-restraint instead. After all, I figured that wasn't the sort of thing to go talking about lightly right in the middle of the enemy camp.

"Well then, please go ahead and dig in. I've got to get working on my own cooking experiments."



And then, the afternoon rolled around.

Roy had temporarily disappeared from the kitchen, but he finally returned when the bell rang out for the third hour.

"For today, anything is fine as long as you use kimyuus meat. But this time... it'll be for five."

"Five people? The master of the house didn't return sooner than planned, did he?" I questioned, stricken by a strange sense of unease, but Roy shook his head.

"Apparently a visitor suddenly showed up. The son of some noble."

If we were just talking about some random noble, he wouldn't have anything to do with me, assuming he wasn't an ally of Melfried's. This just meant I had to focus my attention even further so I didn't hear any complaints.

Well then, what should I make? I've done cream stew, omelettes, piccata, and meatballs, so what would be fitting for the finale...?

Then, it suddenly hit me. I wasn't sure whether or not it was a perfect fit for the capper, but there was a fried dish I was far more skilled at making than donuts: deep-fried chicken.

Let's see, I've got tau oil for the soy sauce, myamuu in place of ginger and garlic, fruit wine to use instead of cooking wine, no potato starch but I should be able to make the fuwano flour work... I've even got sheel to substitute in for the lemon. So there's no issue in terms of ingredients.

I'd made up my mind. To start with, the pages had tried to throw out the oil I had only used once earlier in the day, but I stopped them, only to be left wondering what to do with it. And so, I'd top things off for this final night with one of my specialties.

If I could just get a hold of something like panko and some eggs at the forest's edge, could I try out giba meat cutlets too? This sure is opening up my horizons, I thought as I combined the fruit wine and tau oil, then tossed in some chopped myamuu to make up a marinade. Into that, I placed the kimyuus leg and breast meat I had carefully rubbed with salt and pico leaves. Since the meat had been pickled in salt to begin with, just 30 minutes was more than enough time to soak.

In the meantime, I went about making the side dishes. I wanted some sort of vegetable in order to add a bit of color, for sure.

What about shredded tino, acting as a cabbage substitute instead of lettuce? But from what I heard, they didn't eat raw vegetables much here in Genos.

But doesn't that make it all the more worthwhile to show them just how tasty fresh vegetables can be?

Since I had reten oil and mamaria vinegar, it would be easy to make up a dressing. And why not prepare some mayonnaise while I was at it?

My head and heart felt notably lighter than they had yesterday, and my thoughts and hands felt like they were moving more smoothly as a result. Jeeda acting as a messenger hadn't resulted in any immediate change in my circumstances, but even so, I had been able to let Ai Fa and everybody else know that I was still alive and well here in this world. And that sure did do a lot for my mental state.

Still, if help doesn't arrive quickly enough, I'll have no choice but to try to talk my way to freedom with Cyclaeus. But I'm living through this no matter what, I thought to myself, feeling that resolve from the depths of my heart as I started

on the dressing.

I sautéed up some myamuu and diced aria using reten oil, then added just a bit of chitt seeds. As I moved those to a deep dish and let them cool, I went ahead and grated raw aria and myamuu, and added a 7:3 ratio mixture of mamaria vinegar and reten oil. Next, I stirred it all together and seasoned it with salt and sugar to taste.

Since I wanted to differentiate it from the thickness of mayonnaise, I decided to focus on the acidity and refreshing flavor. To give it a bit of a kick and a unique flavor overall, I had added chitt seeds and myamuu, which were similar to red peppers and garlic. And the taste on my first attempt actually came out pretty satisfying.

After that, I made the mayonnaise, then I headed to the pantry to pick out vegetables.

Shredded tino alone would definitely feel lacking. And so, I decided to add aria and nenon. I thinly sliced the onion-like aria and chopped up the carrot-esque nenon, then roughly mixed them together with the shredded tino in a bowl. Nenon didn't have as strong of a flavor as carrots, so I added plenty in order to grant the dish a brilliant orange color.

Once that was all prepared, the time finally came for deep frying.

The marinade had seeped in well, so after pouring beaten egg over the top, I sprinkled on fuwano powder. As for the temperature of the oil, I went with around 180 degrees, the same as with the donuts. Relying on the knowledge I had picked up during the day, I placed the kimyuus breast in the oil, and once more a satisfying sizzling sound filled the kitchen.

I carefully monitored the changes in color to the surface of the meat, and when the instincts I cultivated back home told me the time was right, I went ahead and pulled it out.

It had ended up a splendid golden brown. Yup, this was exactly how long we cooked it back at home and in the shop.

But since all the ingredients were different, there was no guarantee it would be best in these circumstances too. And so, I moved it to the wire mesh to let

the excess fat drip off, and then I cut into it.

At the very least, it definitely seemed to have been heated through.

I gave it a taste... And the wonderful piping hot oil and meat juices soon filled my mouth.

Since the fuwano flour was closer to wheat flour than potato starch, it had a notably softer crunch to it. On a personal level I found that difficult to accept, but it was still plenty tasty.

As for the meat, it was wonderfully tender. And there were no issues at all with how the marinade seasoned the dish, so it seemed like the same amount of deep frying as back home worked just fine here, too.

Thanks to that, I was feeling a great sense of satisfaction as I turned and said, "Would you like a taste too, Roy?"

"Hmph... You sure are brimming with confidence, there. Like I already said earlier, fried food hasn't been all that popular in Genos lately."

"Is that so? Back in my home country it was enough of a staple that it never went out of style."

With a seriously cautious look on his face, Roy picked up the remaining chunk of fried kimyuus and tossed it into his mouth.

With his eyes shut he carefully chewed it, swallowed, opened his eyes and said, "Damn, it's delicious..."

"Thank you. Well then, I'll go ahead and wrap up."

As I said, I started adding the chunks of breast and thigh meat into the pot one after another. Using the resulting bubbles, I adjusted the heat, finishing up each one in as close to five minute time chunks as possible.

I then plated the salad in a similar round clay dish before finishing by garnishing it with sheel fruit.

Since the flavors would end up mixing, I prepared separate ramekins for the dressing and mayonnaise.

With that, tonight's dinner was complete.

“This is the last time I will be testing your cooking for poison, Sir Asuta...” Chiffon Chel said with her usual fairy-like smile as she brought the chunk of fried kimyuus to her mouth. “Ah... This is my first time eating a fried dish, but it is incredibly delicious...”

“Yeah, I love it too.”

Once she had finished testing for poison, Chiffon Chel hung her head in a deep bow.

“Well then, I will transport this food to the dining room... I will assist you until tomorrow morning, of course, but you have my thanks for everything up until now...”

“I haven’t done anything you’d need to thank me for,” I replied, but then I realized... She must have been thanking me for all the food I’d made so far.

However, it wouldn’t be proper for a slave tasked with testing for poison to say such things. Even so, the look in Chiffon Chel’s eyes told me she felt the need to say so.

“So you intend to remain here in the kitchen, even on the last day...?” Roy asked after Chiffon Chel and the pages left.

“Yes. I can’t go wasting time, after all. So please let me stay, if it’s alright.”

Roy just silently set about starting his own work.

Normally there were cooking assistants or whatever around, adding up to six people cooking dinner, but people stopped dropping by once I started staying in here. Apparently Lefreya thought it best to limit my contact with folks from around the manor as much as possible. From what I was told, Roy was making the main dish for dozens of people all on his own, while the other chefs made up the side dishes in another kitchen.

As expected, Roy’s cooking had a really complex flavor to it. But according to him, he was quite restricted in terms of the variety and amount of ingredients and seasonings he could employ. Apparently the supplies here were ultimately prepared for their employers, while the servants were only allowed a small share of the scraps.

On the other hand, there were essentially no restrictions on the ingredients and seasonings he used for his experiments. After all, he was only using a small amount for that, and besides, there wouldn't be any value in him staying here in this manor if it weren't for the experience he was building up.

From his behavior and what he had said, it seemed that for Roy polishing his skills was his primary job, while making food for the servants was just something he did in his free time.

This is a bit of a digression, but he actually hardly used any aria at all in his cooking. I got the feeling that was related to the fact that Kamyua Yoshu had once told me that they were seen as an ingredient for commoners and were hardly sold at all in the castle town as a result. They were of course well stocked here in this kitchen, but it seemed Roy didn't see them as something worth using.

They're nutritious and delicious, so they're a fantastic ingredient regardless of what they may cost... I thought to myself as I watched Roy cook while also doing my own experimentation.

"So it's a stew for today?"

Roy had just added some fuwano dumplings with tree nuts kneaded into them to what looked like the milk fat and herb soup he usually made for snack time.

As he glanced my way, he whispered, "If..." only to hold his tongue.

"What is it?" I tried asking back.

"If I sautéed fuwano flour with milk fat and mixed it into this... How do you think it would turn out...?" Roy questioned while looking away.

It seemed he was asking how it would go, adding white sauce like I prepared for the cream stew.

"Hmm..." I responded, crossing my arms as I thought it over. "I'm not sure. This dish uses quite a lot of milk fat to begin with, and I get the feeling that thickening it will only make it harder to eat."

It wasn't as if every dish improved in flavor by making it into a stew.

When he heard my response Roy said, “I see,” and started stirring the pot. “Your skill must have earned you quite a reputation in the post town...”

“Well, the giba meat’s been a big help there.”

“Is giba meat really edible? Isn’t that stuff so tough that only the people of the forest’s edge can chew it?”

“That’s not the case at all. It’s just a bit tougher than kimyuus meat. And it’s certainly no less tasty, as it’s delicious grilled, boiled, stewed, and however else you may like it.”

“I find it hard to believe idle gossip like that.”

Now that I thought about it, I might never see Roy ever again after leaving this kitchen for the evening. Was he trying to talk to me now because he found that a shame?

In that case, he should’ve just treated me normally from the very start.

It wasn’t as if I found Roy especially hard to deal with. He might have been a bit arrogant and standoffish, but if we had met more normally and built up an ordinary relationship, I figured we could have been good friends as fellow chefs.

That is, except for one matter I couldn’t overlook.

“Um, how exactly do you feel about people from Mahyudra?”

“Huh? Why’re you asking that, all of a sudden?”

I had been prepared to take that question back depending on how he reacted, but fortunately he seemed just taken off guard.

“I mean, I was born in a foreign nation myself, so I don’t really have any understanding of the whole discord between Selva and Mahyudra. Do you hate northerners as members of an enemy nation?”

“You sure are hard to predict. But no, I don’t hate them. Slaves are just slaves.”

“I can’t say I fully understand that whole slavery thing either. This is an earnest question, but doesn’t it give you a guilty conscience, treating people you have no particular grudge against so poorly?”

“That sure is a gloomy issue to raise... Why are you bringing something like that up now?”

“There’s the matter with Chiffon Chel, of course. And also... I have an acquaintance with mixed blood from the north and west, too.” It had been a while since I had seen it, but Kamyua Yoshu’s aloof face sprung to mind. “I can’t quite say he’s the sort I can like and respect from the depths of my heart, but he’s a pretty charming guy. And I can’t help but feel he wouldn’t have ended up with such an inscrutable personality if it weren’t for the unfortunate treatment faced by people of mixed blood. So to be perfectly blunt, I truly can’t stand the idea of judging someone based on their birth.”

“But... citizens of Selva are used as slaves in Mahyudra, too. There’s no logic to just blaming us for that.”

“I’m not trying to blame anyone. I just question it. If folks still felt a deep hatred toward northerners even in Genos, located so far from Mahyudra, I could at least understand it on a logical level.”

Roy stopped cooking and turned to shoot me a real fed-up look.

“Let me just say, I’ve never gone and whipped a slave or anything. The only ones permitted to do something like that are their noble owners.”

“But you tried to throw a jar at one, right?”

“That was because she said all that ridiculous crap! Actually... Looking back now, I don’t think she said anything wrong at all...” At that point, Roy suddenly broke out in a childish wail, “What the heck? Since this is the last time we’ll be seeing each other, you worked up the nerve to complain at me? If you don’t like my way of doing things, then just come out and say it!”

“That’s not it. I really am just asking questions. I figure it’ll be good for me to have heard some opinions from westerners, for the future as well. But if I upset you, then I’m sorry.”

Roy stood there silently with a sulky look on his face.

And I was feeling bad about running my mouth when I apparently shouldn’t have, so I got back to my own cooking.

It was then that the door to the kitchen swung open, as if it had been waiting for a break in the conversation.

“Sir Asuta, if I may have a bit of your time... Lady Lefreya is calling for you...”

Naturally, that was Chiffon Chel.

“So is she finally going to give her impressions now that she’s had that one last dinner? If she would just release me afterwards, I’d certainly be glad.”

“No... It seems tonight’s guest is insisting on talking with you, Sir Asuta...”

“Huh? But he’s the son of some noble, right?”

“Yes... The second son of Count Daleim, Polarth...”

To me, every last noble but Melfried was an enemy. And even Melfried wasn’t a true ally so much as someone we had managed to form a united front with.

“I’d honestly like to refrain. I’m not in a position where I’d really like to become better acquainted with nobles.”

“You’re going to refuse a summons from a noble? That sort of thing will get you whipped for sure, even when we’re not talking about Lady Lefreya,” Roy chimed in, still wearing a sulky look. “Besides, he must like your cooking and want to pay you for it, right? You probably can’t expect a silver coin from the second son of Daleim, but there still shouldn’t be any issue accepting that, right?”

It seemed the ruling nobles weren’t all that loved and respected by the people here in this town, either.

Still, I couldn’t exactly go taking things quite that lightly.

“B-But I was kidnapped by force. Isn’t it sort of odd to have someone like that meet a guest?”

“I don’t know anything about that. Isn’t it possible the guest’s just been praising you and she wants to brag? Besides, even if he learns of that, it’s not like the second son of the Daleim house can go opposing the Turan household.”

This was all just sounding less and less advantageous to me.

“At any rate, if Lady Lefreya’s already granted her permission, I doubt you’ve

got a right to refuse. So hurry up and get going.”

And so, after giving a sigh, I ended up accompanying Chiffon Chel and the soldiers down the hallway.

For me, the fact that Lefreya gave her permission under the circumstances was what was bugging me most of all.

Well, considering how simpleminded she can be, she may have just given permission without really thinking it through... She couldn't be planning to hand me over to the count's house or whatever, right?

Something like that, which Jeeda wouldn't know of, would never make it to my comrades at the forest's edge or Zasshuma. No matter how I looked at it, getting moved away from this manor would essentially be a death sentence for me.

If that really is what she's plotting, I'll lie my ass off as hard as I need to in order to stay here.

Sad as it might be, I just couldn't imagine this being a rescue attempt from Zasshuma or Melfried. Though Kamyua Yoshu had told me Melfried had allies among the other nobles working with him, I figured they wouldn't be able to move till tomorrow morning at the earliest.

Such thoughts ran through my head as we walked the labyrinthine halls, and before long a familiar set of extravagant doors stood before us. Apparently the lady of the house and her guests had been enjoying their dinner in that room with the chandelier and the four stone statues.

“Before we enter, allow me to make one thing clear. Though you will be conversing with the guest, you are absolutely not to reveal your name or background,” one of the soldiers guiding me stated, which I scowled in response to.

“If that's what I'm being told, I'll obey, but isn't it rude not to introduce yourself when faced with a noble guest?”

“That isn't for you to worry about,” the man replied in a monotone voice, then he called out through the doors, “I have brought the chef from overseas!”

With that, the doors opened.

There were indeed five people seated there, as well as Mussel standing guard.

Naturally, Lefreya sat at the head of the table. She was in a pure white dress like the other day, this one having just as many frills as before on the apron portion stretching up to her chest as she occupied that couch that could hold up to four people.

To her right sat Diel and her father. Diel had on a cobalt blue dress that was far simpler than Lefreya's but still clearly of high class, and was sitting quietly in her chair. She was holding back her bangs with a silver hair accessory again today, and looked rather adorable. She wasn't even looking my way, just sitting with a demure look on her face.

Since Diel was still here in the room, she must have been fed some sort of lie saying I had been properly hired or something.

At any rate, next to her sat a man I assumed was her father, who I was seeing for the first time. He had the small yet robust build you would expect from a southerner, and was wearing a high-quality collared tunic and pants that looked like slacks. His mustache and hair were plain dark brown rather than speckled like his daughter's, and he had striking, stubborn-looking green eyes.

Across from them were today's guests.

One was a man, and he certainly did have the appearance of a noble.

His outfit wasn't especially extravagant, but he had an embroidered sash around his cream colored frock, and he nonchalantly wore shining accessories made with gemstones and silver around his arms and neck. The young man's dark brown hair was combed down smoothly against his head, and while he wasn't quite obese he was certainly a bit on the portly side.

His skin was naturally that of a westerner, and his eyes were a deep brown. This was undoubtedly the second son of Count Daleim, Polarth.

However...

To be honest, it took me a good while to look over the other people in the room in much detail.

And that was because my gaze was fixed on the woman next to Polarth, from the very moment I entered the room.

She was quite young, as well as extraordinarily beautiful. In addition to a silver breastplate, she had on a gorgeous long skirt that stretched from her hips downwards. And what could be seen of her legs through the slit in the side was positively captivating.

On her shoulders she wore a shawl embroidered with complex patterns, but her taut waist was entirely exposed.

Her long hair had silver and jewels tastefully braided into it. And the crescent-shaped bits of silver dangling from her ears were shining especially brilliantly in the light from the chandelier.

On top of all that, her fingers had numerous rings, and her wrists had thin silver bracelets swaying about them. If she weren't so beautiful, that level of extravagance would have come across as unpleasant.

However, she really was stunning.

I had never met anyone so lovely as her before in all seventeen years of my life.

To top it all off...

The woman had long blonde hair, blue eyes filled with more strength than anyone else, and skin the color of creamy chocolate.

"It seems there's no mistake," the woman said in a voice that wasn't especially loud, but was as firm as steel. "That man is a member of my house, Asuta of the Fa clan. With that fact made clear, I ask that you allow me to return with him," Ai Fa stated in a commanding tone, clad in that gorgeous attire.

2

"What exactly is this all about?" Lefreya questioned as I stood there so dumbfounded I couldn't even speak. Her voice, meanwhile, was trembling with so much rage it sounded like she was about to explode.

“I don’t see what there is to explain. Well, I suppose this ended up being something of a sneak attack, so I shall at least apologize for that much,” the young noble seated next to Ai Fa replied in an oddly cheerful voice. All the while, my eyes remained fixed on my clan head. “It seems that young man is Asuta of the Fa clan, the chef from the forest’s edge who was abducted by ruffians in the post town several days ago, causing quite a commotion. Were that not the case, tonight would have simply ended with me complimenting you on the delicious meal.”

“What *exactly* is this all about?” Lefreya repeated in the same tone.

“Well now. I would say that considering the circumstances, we should be the ones asking that question. After all, a chef from the forest’s edge of all places is here in the manor of Count Turan, practicing his craft. How exactly did such a thing come to be?”

“I’m free to employ whoever I please as a chef!”

“Yes, it’s just as you say. You may employ someone from Sym or Jagar, or even Mahyudra or overseas to make your food if you so wish. However, I do believe some form of explanation is required as to how precisely a man kidnapped by ruffians ended up cooking in this manor, wouldn’t you agree?”

His tone was perfectly charming yet also oddly indirect, vaguely resembling that of Kamyua Yoshu. However, his voice lacked the cunningness of Kamyua Yoshu’s, coming across as more pure and earnest. That was what I was vaguely thinking as my eyes remained fixed on Ai Fa.

“The truth of the matter is, I had a discussion with a certain acquaintance of mine earlier today. He informed me that apparently, Asuta of the Fa clan was being confined in Count Turan’s manor. And so, he asked if I could please go and confirm that fact in his stead. Of course I laughed the idea off as impossible, but he had nowhere else to turn, so I felt I had no choice but to assist him.”

“In other words, you deceived me... That woman claimed to be the daughter of a wealthy merchant with blood from Sym, but she was actually a person of the forest’s edge.”

“That is correct. This is Ai Fa of the Fa clan, a woman of the forest’s edge. I asked her to accompany me in order to confirm the identity of Asuta of the Fa

clan, as the one closest to him. Perhaps it's rude to say so, but it's difficult to imagine a woman of the forest's edge would take on such an elegant appearance, is it not?"

"So, the house of Daleim truly intends to oppose the house of Turan...?" Lefreya questioned in an ominous tone, her gaze torn from Ai Fa and myself.

The young noble lady just kept lounging on her couch. However, next to the fuming girl stood Mussel, looking every bit as enraged and gripping the handle of his blade.

"Do you intend to compound your crimes, westerner?" Ai Fa asked, her voice absolutely calm as she brought the man's actions in check. "You are clearly one of those described in the wanted notices being distributed throughout the post town. That other Sanjura man does not seem to be here, though."

"Who was it?! Nobody should have known this chef was here in the manor! Who betrayed us?!" Lefreya shouted, slamming her tiny fists on the table. The nearly empty plates and glasses atop the table rattled as she did so. "Diel! You tattled to someone in the post town, didn't you?! You've got no problem with walking about that filthy place, after all!"

"Could you please stop it with the false accusations? I kept my promise to you and held my tongue. Even though I didn't believe what you said about Asuta being here of his own volition in the least," Diel nonchalantly replied. She must have been pretty shocked when Ai Fa first walked into the room, but it seemed she had successfully feigned ignorance up until this point. "Besides, I haven't been able to step foot out of the castle town for the past several days anyway, so it's not like I had a chance to tell on you in the first place. And I don't exactly have any casual acquaintances in the post town I can chat up other than Asuta, either."

"Indeed. I give my guarantee that my daughter is innocent. I took her pass away days back, so there was no way for her to leave the castle town," Diel's father added, speaking up for the first time. Fitting to his appearance, he had a real tough, obstinate-sounding voice. "I would also like to ask a question of you. Did you not tell my daughter that it would incite unnecessary anger in the people of the forest's edge if they were to learn Asuta was working here of his

own free will, and so it was best not to say anything?”

Lefreya hit the table even more, ignoring his words.

“Then who was it?! Anyone who would betray their employer deserves to be whipped until they lose consciousness!”

“I am also uncertain as to who it was. Perhaps it was someone who worked up the courage to go against their employer out of a wish to save you from piling on further crimes?” Polarth said with a grin, having apparently recovered from Mussel’s glare.

It was a perfectly innocent-looking smile, but also one that told me he would prove irritating as an enemy. Despite the fact that it was apparently unthinkable for the Daleim family to oppose the house of Turan, Polarth was standing here right in Lefreya’s way.

“Isn’t there another matter we should be discussing instead, though? It would be quite a scandal if it became known that the daughter of the peerless Count Turan had a man abducted from town by force.”

“Hmph! I doubt the other nobles would have the nerve to try to judge me for that!”

“Oh, is that so? But Sir Melfried, leader of the ducal guard, has been quite serious about enforcing the law and tightening discipline of late. When faced with that man’s determination to uphold the law, even the young daughter of Count Turan—”

“What, are you saying I’ll be detained and whipped?” At that point, Lefreya’s expression shifted again. Her face had been taut with anger, but now she broke out in an impish grin. “I see. That truly is amusing... What sort of face would my father make, were that to happen, I wonder?”

“I absolutely will not allow you to meet with such a fate, Lady Lefreya,” the ox-like Mussel stated in his muffled voice. And instantly, Lefreya’s temper exploded once more.

“Quiet, you! Who gave you permission to speak?! Be silent, Mussel!”

Hearing that, Mussel just hung his head.

While staring at the attendant's hand that still gripped his sword even now, Ai Fa calmly started talking again.

"When dealing with criminals, such matters must ultimately be left to the laws of Genos. However, I ask that you allow me to return with Asuta."

"You can't! I can't let that man leave until my father returns!"

"What does Count Turan have to do with this matter? I would imagine he would wish for everything to be resolved as cleanly as possible..." Polarth chimed in, sounding rather troubled.

And next to him, Ai Fa was staring resolutely at Lefreya. "I do not care about anything else but taking my clan member from this place here and now."

"I told you, you can't! Until father returns—"

"This is quite a commotion, is it not...?" a gloomy voice interjected from beyond the inner door, which soon opened.

Before long, a small old man accompanied by three robust soldiers appeared.

"What is this fuss all about...? And what are these unfamiliar people doing here in my manor?"

It was Cyclaeus.

The wicked noble himself was finally standing before me.

This was turning out to be such an insane night that I felt myself getting dizzy.

The man really did look just like Gazraan Rutim had described. Though his head was quite large, his body was small like a child's. He couldn't have been taller than Lala Ruu at most.

And around that small frame, he wore an exaggerated white frock coat. Plus, he had on more accessories than anyone else present. In fact, just looking from the neck on down, he was as ornately decked out as any woman.

However, his face was so pale he looked ill, and it was covered in countless wrinkles. Though when it came to wrinkly faces, the Sudra clan head took the cake in my mind. This visage was far gloomier and more obstinate-looking, like some sort of eerie beast rather than a proper human being.

His head was big like an eggplant, and his chestnut-colored hair was thin and utterly lacking in luster. But in comparison to the size of his head, his face was on the small side, with sunken eyes glaring like needles.

He had a smooshed nose, pale lips, flaccid skin despite how thin he appeared, and yet a firm jaw. The more I looked at him, the more eerie the man appeared.

However, that surely didn't come just from his unusual appearance. His eyes were the same reddish brown color as his daughter's, but they were filled with a powerful and piercing egotism that overwhelmed those who saw it.



“Why, if it isn’t Lord Cyclaeus... W-Were you not supposed to return tomorrow morning? That was what my father told me...”

“There was a matter that had me somewhat concerned, and so after treating those present at the meeting to one last feast, I returned early,” Cyclaeus replied with a truly enigmatic smile. Just as Gazraan Rutim had said, that grin hid the man’s true thoughts and feelings. “But, what business is it exactly that brings you here to my manor, son of Daleim? And you say you visited knowing that I was away...?”

“W-Well, there were some rather complicated circumstances that led me here...” Polarth mumbled.

From next to him, Ai Fa sharply interjected, “So, you are Cyclaeus? How fortuitous to meet you here. Cyclaeus, I came to this manor in order to retrieve my clan member, who had been abducted by criminals. This man, Polarth, simply lent me his aid in that task.”

Ai Fa really didn’t ever hesitate, no matter who she was up against.

Meanwhile, Cyclaeus’s eyes like poisoned needles slowly turned her way.

“You... You almost look like a person of the forest’s edge...”

“Indeed. I am Ai Fa of the Fa clan, a woman of the forest’s edge. All three leading clan heads are aware of my actions here today.”

Cyclaeus said nothing in response.

“You should have also heard tell of how a man from the forest’s edge was kidnapped. After all, Donda Ruu has requested an audience with you over and over again these past several days. But you never showed yourself, and all he got back was a response to leave everything to the guards... And here I find my clan member Asuta detained in your manor. How do you explain that?”

Still, Cyclaeus remained silent.

“It is not as if our suspicions have been solely fixed on you. In fact, some among us have questioned if this is in fact a crafty plot designed to form a rift between you and the forest’s edge... At any rate, up until yesterday we had been exhausting our efforts to search everywhere in Genos, the castle town

aside. However, we couldn't find so much as a single solitary trace of my clan member Asuta or the criminals in the post town, the Turan lands, or the farms. And so, we had planned to try to gain permission to enter the castle town today, no matter what it took."

The crafty old noble just kept on listening.

"Before that could occur, though, we received news this morning that Asuta was being held in your manor. Following that lead, I headed here to confirm, and sure enough he was not only being detained in this place, but one of the kidnappers described in the wanted posters was even here. From what I hear, it was done under your daughter's orders... But did this truly happen without your knowledge?"

Though Ai Fa's face and voice remained calm, her eyes had the blazing light of a hunter's glare in them. In fact, the soldiers on either side of me even gulped in response.

"The three leading clan heads stated that they could not accept you as the representative for Genos until the truth of the matter was made clear, and that is an opinion shared by the people of the forest's edge as a whole. Cyclaeus, I would hear your response."

In an eerily bold act, Cyclaeus wet his pale lips with his tongue.

"You say my daughter Lefreya kidnapped a person of the forest's edge...?"

"The ones to actually carry out the act were that man there, as well as another by the name of Sanjura. But from what I was told, your daughter was indeed the one to give the orders."

"Lefreya... You have heard what our visitor from the forest's edge has to say. You did not truly do such a thing, did you?"

"I simply invited that man here as a chef. I can see no justification for this slander being laid on me," Lefreya replied, haughtily puffing up her slender chest.

Cyclaeus, meanwhile, just silently and eerily grinned away.

"H-However, this officer here, Mussel, is in fact wanted as a criminal. No

matter who gave the order, that doesn't mean those crimes should be simply forgiven," Polarth interjected with a twitching smile, his face having lost quite a bit of color.

"Young Polarth... Your father and elder brother must be enjoying the meal I considerately had prepared at the castle about now... Are they aware of all this?"

"Naturally, they do not know a thing. This is a personal matter brought about by a certain someone begging for my assistance."

"Oh...? A certain someone, you say..."

"Th-That person is someone who also has ties to Sir Melfried. Since Sir Melfried is unable to leave the castle until tomorrow morning, I was asked to escort Lady Ai Fa of the forest's edge to this manor in his place, a shabby replacement though I may be. After all, as someone without an official post, I was left with an excess of time on my hands as the meetings were being held."

Though he maintained a smile on his plump visage, Polarth's face had gone completely pale. He was clearly being overwhelmed by the mysterious pressure given off by Cyclaeus.

Before his nerves completely gave out on him, though, Ai Fa sharply interjected, "So then, what is your reply? Donda Ruu and many others are currently awaiting our return outside the castle gates."

Cyclaeus gave a small sigh. And then, he slowly shook his large head.

"Jimon..."

"Yes, lord," one of the officers attending Cyclaeus replied, stepping forward.

"Arrest Mussel."

"Are you certain...?"

"Polarth of the Daleim house would not speak ill of another without certain proof... So for now, we must believe his words, and investigate the matter later..."

"Very well," the large man named Jimon replied, turning toward Mussel.

In the next moment, the ox-like Mussel leapt like some sort of bizarre bird. It was the sort of movement you wouldn't expect from someone with such a dull-looking face, and he ended up atop the table in an instant.

The plates under his feet cracked, and red fruit wine spilled out from a toppled container.

Then, his fingers twisted like talons as he jumped at Polarth.

"Gyah!" the plump noble shrilly shrieked as he tumbled backwards, chair and all.

Before Mussel could reach the man, though, Ai Fa swiftly grabbed hold of his wrist and slammed his back into the floor.

Despite the plush rug laid out, it was likely still paved with stone underneath. And so, Mussel let out a moan like a dying toad as his whole body twitched.

"Such a fool..." Lefreya coldly spat out.

And yet, when she looked away with a huff, I felt like I glimpsed a sad look like a child who had had her precious pet dog mercilessly smacked, just for a moment.

"Is Mussel the only one whose crimes shall be questioned? I was the one who ordered him to invite Asuta of the Fa clan here to this manor, Father."

Cyclaeus didn't respond. And his eyes like poison needles didn't so much as glance at his daughter.

"At any rate, we must first ascertain the truth of the matter, and then pass judgment in accordance with the laws of Genos... I cannot think of any other appropriate means for proceeding, but what do you have to say, Polarth...?"

"Y-Yes! I believe that is most wise! If we were to lose the trust of the people of the forest's edge over such a matter, it would certainly have an enormous impact on our future, after all!" Polarth replied, despite still being down on the floor.

Once again, Cyclaeus slowly turned toward Ai Fa.

"Well then, please inform the leading clan heads of the forest's edge as such... You have my word, I most certainly do not wish for a rift to be formed with your

people in such a way... Still, my still young daughter's crimes are the result of my own shortcomings as a father..." Cyclaeus stated, his eyes twitching ever so slightly as he did so. Was the emotion he was most desperately trying to cover up his own feelings of humiliation?

"So, you claim to have nothing to do with this wrongdoing, then?" Ai Fa questioned, shooting Cyclaeus a hunter's glare.

"Of course... Assuming I *had* been involved in this plot, why would I bring a man I had kidnapped back to my own manor? Especially considering I have such important guests here at the moment..."

Those "important guests," Diel and her father, had been cautiously holding their tongues for a while now. However, they both had a strong light shining away in their jade eyes.

"And my words to leave everything to the guards came from my trust in the militia captain's skills, as well as my wish that the people of the forest's edge continue to carry out their own work..."

"Yes, it did indeed seem that the guards in the post town were handling their tasks properly."

"I swear on the name of the western god, Selva... There is no doubt that none in Genos laments these circumstances more than I do..."

Surprisingly, that might have actually been how Cyclaeus truly felt, in the sense that he surely had all sorts of plots in play for the meeting that would be held in six days, only for this to come out of nowhere and upset everything.

"I see. Very well, I will convey your words to the leading clan heads as you stated them," Ai Fa cool-headedly replied as Mussel was bound with rope by her feet.

Lefreya, meanwhile, was glaring at her father with bitter tears in her eyes.

Cyclaeus, however, stubbornly refused to so much as look his daughter's way. And then...

"If that's all, let us return home, Asuta," Ai Fa called out.

That alone was enough to cause my heart to start pounding like a

jackhammer.

“Ah, hold on a moment. If we’re leaving, I’ve got to change out of these clothes first.”

Wait, was that doofy statement the first one I had made since stepping into this room?

“From what I can tell, you are that foreign-born man of the forest’s edge who has been doing business in the post town, are you not...?”

It was then that Cyclaeus faced me head on for the first time.

What a truly sickening gaze. Just looking into his eyes was enough to send a chill down my spine. I didn’t think I had been looked at in such a revolting way since meeting with the late Zattsu Suun.

“You have my sincerest apologies... You will have to allow me to apologize again once Mussel’s crimes have been properly laid out in a trial held by the legal officers...” Cyclaeus stated, not hanging his head but instead placing his right hand over his chest and hiding his despicable gaze behind his eyelids.

“Hold on! You must eat that man’s cooking as well! The food he makes—”

“Silence, Lefreya...” Cyclaeus muttered with his eyes still closed, cutting her off. “I am disappointed in you... You are to remain in your room until I say otherwise, where you will behave yourself... After all, you shall be facing an interrogation as well...”

At that, Lefreya shut her mouth, trembling with fear as she did so.

And with his back still turned to her, Cyclaeus once more opened his eyes.

“You said that you wish to change? That can most certainly be arranged.”

“Right,” the soldiers on either side of me replied, grabbing hold of the handles on the doors behind us.

“Allow us to accompany him, too. And before that, would you mind returning the blade placed in your care?” Faced with Ai Fa’s words and Cyclaeus’s gaze, one of the soldiers went and brought out a splendid longsword from another room. It wasn’t the sort of savage blade used at the forest’s edge, but instead one held in an extravagant scabbard.

Polarth held it out and Ai Fa accepted it, hanging it at her hip. And watching that, Cyclaeus broke out in another eerie grin.

“I see you are indeed a hunter of the forest’s edge... No matter what gorgeous attire you may wrap yourself up in, the air about you is something else entirely...”

Was he scolding his soldiers, with the implication being, “Why did you let someone like that into this manor even so?” After all, the soldiers who had returned to my side had both gone pale.

“Will you tell the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge that I would like to offer my explanation and apologies tomorrow when the sun hits its peak...?”

“Very well. Ah, there is one more matter I must convey as well,” Ai Fa said, stopping and turning to look at Cyclaeus. “Though we searched everywhere in Genos aside from the castle town over these past four days, we were unable to locate that Sanjura man. All things considered, it seems clear he is an ally of Mussel there, and so we would like to see him swiftly arrested.”

“Understood...” Cyclaeus answered with a deep nod. Sparing one last look at Lefreya with her trembling shoulders and the worried Diel, we passed beyond the doors.

Then, with Chiffon Chel and the soldiers guiding us, we headed once more down those brick hallways. It still felt unreal to me that Ai Fa was part of the procession this time, though.

When we made it to the room, I asked Chiffon Chel, “Um, while I’m changing, could it be just me and my clan head?”

The soldiers were the ones to actually give permission for that request, and so Ai Fa and I entered the room alone.

I turned to face her immediately.

It really was undoubtedly Ai Fa, despite how utterly unfamiliar her attire was.

Though the way she was dressed was even more showy than what she wore for a banquet, she looked at me head on with the same gallant expression as always.

“Ai Fa...” I called out.

This really wasn't a dream, right?

Her expression unchanging, Ai Fa steadily looked me up and down.

“You aren't injured anywhere, are you...?” she asked in a tone that made it hard to tell what she was feeling, unsurprisingly.

“No. As you can see, I'm doing just fine.”

“Right...”

There were countless things I wanted to say to her.

That I was sorry for worrying her, and asking if she was alright too... But as soon as they made it to the tip of my tongue, they ended up sliding back down my throat.

“Ai Fa, I...”

If nothing else, I at least had to apologize. And thank her, too.

I still felt out of it, as if I was dreaming, but I tried to force out the words somehow.

However, Ai Fa lightly held up her hand to stop me, and gently looked my way. And before long, clear droplets welled up in those blue eyes of hers, leaving me taken aback. As I stood there unable to so much as get out a word, the tears started streaming down her cheeks. And then, all of a sudden, Ai Fa's face was a wreck. It was like the expression of a young child having a breakdown.

“Asuta...” she called out again, wrapping her arms around me. She buried her face in my shoulder and started sobbing. In no time flat my clothes were soaked with her tears, and I could feel the warmth coming off her body. It had been days now since I had felt that heat from her.

Before I realized it, I was firmly hugging Ai Fa back.

“I'm sorry, Ai Fa... Really, truly sorry...”

Rather than replying, Ai Fa just kept on sobbing. Though there was a definite strength in her arms, her body felt like it was slowly, steadily sinking to the

floor. And so, I just hugged her all the tighter.

“Asuta... you unbelievable fool...” Ai Fa finally wrung out between her sniffing.

After being torn apart for nearly four whole days, we had at last been reunited.



3

“My, I wondered just how things would turn out when Count Cyclaeus appeared! I certainly am glad that everything ended smoothly!” Polarth exclaimed as we rode in his totes-drawn wagon.

It was a box-shaped carriage made entirely from wood, so there was no concern of the driver eavesdropping.

“I suppose in all likelihood the meetings in the castle came to a close and they were all prepared to enjoy a celebratory banquet, only for Sir Cyclaeus to receive some sort of report. That man values dinner parties above all else, so I cannot imagine him leaving one to return to his manor otherwise. Thinking back on it, that Zasshuma man’s judgment that this matter absolutely could not wait until tomorrow turned out to be entirely correct, did it not?!”

Polarth seemed to be in something of a manic state now that he was freed from Cyclaeus’s intense gaze. However, I honestly still knew nothing about what this man was thinking or what his goals were. Still, since he referred to Zasshuma as “that Zasshuma man,” they couldn’t have been too close. I asked him about that.

“Indeed. Sir Kamyua is the only one that I have ties to. I only heard of that Zasshuma man’s name through him. And he said to take the man’s words as though they were his own.”

“Ah, so you helped us out because of your connection with Kamyua?”

“Yes, indeed. He’s a truly amusing man, is he not? It’s intriguing hearing the tales of his travels to various countries, and even when dealing with a noble he never resorts to flattery. He even earned the approval of the infamously straight-laced Sir Melfried.”

Honestly, Polarth himself really seemed to lack the characteristic arrogance I expected of nobles. It wasn’t as if this little interaction we’d had was enough for me to truly know the man, but he came across as earnest and lacking in any sort of hidden darker side.

Since Ai Fa was just sitting there in polite silence next to me, it had just been

my voice and Polarth's filling the inside of the carriage for a while now.

"Still, I can't say I enjoy placing myself in the midst of such trouble lightly. Who knows what would become of me if I were to openly defy Sir Cyclaeus?! Yes, that was certainly the risk of a lifetime!"

"I really am grateful. If it weren't for your help, it's hard to say where I would've ended up."

"Think nothing of it! Though I may be a noble, I'm merely a second son, after all! If I didn't take risks like this now and again, I'd spend my whole life living in the shadows!" Polarth stated, bringing his flushed face in closer to mine. And as the carriage swayed, his plump cheeks jiggled along. "At any rate, it seems we'll be sharing the same lot from here on out! And so, let's help one another in order to carve out a brighter tomorrow! Can I count on you for that, Sir Asuta of the Fa clan?"

"Huh? Ah, yeah."

What exactly was he expecting of me, there?

I mean, he saved me from that whole dilemma so I certainly was willing to do anything I could to help him... But I honestly couldn't tell what he was thinking, which left me feeling a bit uneasy.

"Well, let's keep the tricky stuff for some other time. After all, we should be arriving at the castle gates soon. You'll be reunited with your precious comrades at last!"

The carriage had certainly already been running for a fair enough while now. But when I pulled back the curtain over the small window, I couldn't even make out the buildings of the castle town.

"Ah, but isn't the drawbridge up at night, so you can't go in or out of the castle town?"

"No worries! All my faults aside, I *am* still a member of the Daleim house! Though I'm merely the second son, managing that much is no problem at all!"

"Really? I'm seriously glad to hear it."

Ai Fa might have already been by my side, but I wanted to let as many other

people as possible know that I was alright. Dora must have already long since headed home, but at the bare minimum I wanted to go see the inn owners and stop by the Ruu settlement.

“By the way, Lady Ai Fa... What shall we do about the clothing and accessories I loaned you? I don’t believe there should be anywhere to change between here and the castle gates,” Polarth said as he turned to face my clan head.

There really wasn’t so much as a hint of disdain toward the people of the forest’s edge in his gaze. And he fortunately didn’t seem to be shooting Ai Fa any lecherous looks either, which was definitely a relief.

“Then would you not mind if I waited till tomorrow to return them? Though I entrusted my comrades with my clothing, I would not feel at ease changing in this carriage.”

“Right, you may be a hunter of the forest’s edge, but you are indeed still a young woman! At any rate, I don’t mind in the least. However, I did borrow them from the manor’s treasure storage without permission, so it would prove quite troublesome were even a single ring missing.”

“Understood. I will make certain everything is returned to you.”

“Right! Please do!”

Polarth looked to be in quite a good mood, while Ai Fa remained perfectly expressionless.

After her tearful reunion with me, Ai Fa had regained her composure, once more seeming like she had nerves of steel. The area around her eyes was admittedly still a bit red, but with only a lantern to rely on for light, that wasn’t the sort of thing anyone would notice.

“Sir Polarth, we have arrived at the main gate,” the driver soon announced through the window, having brought the carriage to a stop.

“Right!” Polarth replied with a hearty nod, stepping outside.

Was he negotiating with the guards manning the gates? At any rate, after just a few minutes a gatekeeper with a massive spear peered vacantly into the carriage.

“I’ve indeed counted two passengers. Those two will be leaving the castle gates, while the rest will be returning shortly, correct?”

“That’s exactly right! Now then, go ahead and lower the bridge!”

This carriage was currently being guarded by three soldiers riding toots, but apparently once we made it past the gates, Ai Fa and I would be returning to the post town alone.

No wait, Donda Ruu’s supposedly waiting outside, right?

Just how angry would he be at me for this massive screwup? Honestly, I felt glad just to be in a situation where I could worry about such matters.

“Now then, time for your triumphant return!”

I had figured Polarth’s words were a bit overblown there, but at any rate, we were ready to move again. The drawbridge descended with a heavy *clank, clank, clank* and then the carriage resumed rattling along. And in less than ten seconds, it stopped again.

“We’ve arrived. I can’t imagine you would be in any danger, but please do take care on your way home. And give my regards to that leading clan head fellow, too!”

After Ai Fa and I each thanked Polarth, we descended from the carriage.

We were still atop the bridge at the moment. It was a big one, probably four or five meters wide, and had railings coming up to around chest height installed on either side. Since it was a drawbridge, it naturally stretched out over a deep moat.

Because the passenger door to the carriage was in the rear, I was facing toward the gate to the castle town, as well as the surrounding walls as I stepped out.

Those stone walls were as tall as a two-story building, or at least six to seven meters high. Though the sun had already completely set, there were countless flames lit atop the castle walls, making it easy to see just how imposing they were.

The castle gates were carved right into those walls, and looked like a massive

pitch black cavern. Were the gatekeepers holding up torches and observing us? After all, I could spy some red flames flickering within that dark gaping mouth.

Glancing around, it seemed those flames continued to dot the top of the walls well off into the distance.

Those sturdy structures protected the castle at the heart of Genos, as well as the castle town inhabited by nobles and wealthy merchants. And they were also what had isolated me from my comrades.

So Jeeda climbed over those? That's seriously impressive, I thought as Polarth waved to us from inside the carriage.

"Well then, we shall meet again in the near future! May the Daleim house and the people of the forest's edge prosper together!"

The three topos-riding guards and the topos pulling the carriage then made a graceful U-turn and headed back over the bridge.

With that, the world outside the castle walls came into view, and what was revealed was a truly unexpected sight.

And at the same time, cheers exploded forth.

"Wh-What the...?"

It was such a storm of cheering that it felt like it might make my ears ring.

But that was no surprise, since there were dozens of folks awaiting us there on the other side of the drawbridge.

"Asuta...!"

"It's Asuta! He's really back!"

I could just barely make out those words.

"Let's go. It will make the gatekeepers in the castle town uneasy if we force them to wait much longer to raise the bridge," Ai Fa said, grabbing hold of my arm and walking briskly forwards. But even as she half pulled me along, I still couldn't grasp the situation at all.

"Asuta...!" a figure shouted out, running up from the crowd. The slender girl of the forest's edge wore her long black hair in braids... In other words, it was

Reina Ruu.

“Oh Asuta, I’m so glad you’re alright...!”

Once again, the clothing from the forest’s edge that I had only recently changed into was soaked in fresh tears.

However, Ai Fa didn’t slow her stride in the least, so I ended up being pulled along by my arm, with Reina Ruu getting dragged along with me.

“Asuta! You’re okay?! Those nobles didn’t do anything weird to you, did they?!” a large man shouted out, grabbing onto me as soon we made it over the drawbridge.

As a grinding sound announced that the drawbridge was raising back up behind me, in my shock I exclaimed, “D-Dora? What in the world is going on here?”

“Do you really need to ask?! Good grief, you really are something else...” Dora said as he wept manly tears.

And at his feet, Tara was smiling and crying as she said, “Asuta!”

“All those with ties to you here in the post town were informed that I was borrowing the aid of a noble in order to enter the castle town. Of course, they were also strictly ordered not to speak a word about our plan until after the sun fell, so that the guards wouldn’t catch on. That much was necessary, to make certain that Cyclaeus and his daughter could not possibly slither out of this,” Ai Fa explained, as she was the only one still calm and composed. “And then, once the sun set, everyone came running here to the castle gates. That’s nothing to be surprised over. After all, everyone was thinking of you, Asuta.”

Now that I was getting a better look at the crowd, saying there were dozens seemed like underselling it, as there had to be over a hundred here... At the most, it might have even been 150 or so.

Half of them were people of the forest’s edge, while the other half came from the post town. And since a number of them were carrying torches, they were dyed in an orange light.

The majority of them were shouting with joy, and those who weren’t had

tears in their eyes.

Sheera Ruu was there.

So was Lala Ruu.

And Vina Ruu.

Li Sudra.

Milano Mas.

Nail.

Naudis.

Yumi.

And a great number whose names I didn't even know.

And from the crowd, two young boys slowly approached: Ludo and Shin Ruu.

"Asuta... So you're okay?" Ludo Ruu questioned with a hearty sigh. "That's a huge relief. I thought I'd end up regretting being so careless for the rest of my life." Then while deeply hanging his head, he whispered, "I give my thanks to the forest..." That was the first time I had ever seen the boy look so meek and docile.

And then, there was Shin Ruu.

"Asuta..." he said as he staggered forward. When she noticed, Reina Ruu pulled back from me, still crying.

Shin Ruu was always so calm and composed, but now he grabbed hold of both of my shoulders and looked on the verge of tears.

"Shin Ruu..."

"I'm sorry... I just wasn't strong enough..."

Shin Ruu was just a bit shorter than me, and so it wasn't all that different from when Reina Ruu had hugged me as he wrapped his arms around me and sobbed. He was a man of the forest's edge, but here he was weeping in public.

And wracked with the thought of how much guilt I had made the boy feel, I felt like I was going to start crying too.

“It’s fine. I’m the one who couldn’t protect himself, after all. Please stop worrying yourself, Shin Ruu.”

Even so, Shin Ruu just kept on sobbing for a good while longer.

Eventually, though, Lala Ruu walked over and slapped him on the back.

“That’s enough, don’t you think? And just so you know, if you keep weeping away like that tomorrow, you’ll get me angry at you.” And then, she looked my way and shot me a smile. “I’m glad you’re alright. And you look like you’re doing fine, Asuta.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Lala Ruu.”

Though her smile looked the same as always, Lala Ruu’s eyes were clearly red.

Meanwhile, folks from around town approached from behind her.

“Even my daughter managed to escape harm, but you went and got kidnapped, you damn fool,” Milano Mas grumbled angrily with a scary look on his face.

“Seriously. And to think, you were worrying about *me*,” Yumi chuckled with an indescribable expression.

“Asuta... I was just so careless... I don’t even know how to apologize for that,” Nail said, looking like he was about to break down crying, too. It was the inn owner’s belief that he should behave as emotionlessly as possible, so this was definitely the first time I had ever seen him this out of sorts.

“At any rate, I’m just glad you’re alright,” Naudis called out while flinching a bit from all the hunters of the forest’s edge shouting and hollering away.

Yes, both people of the forest’s edge and folks from the post town were all jumbled together there, celebrating my return. It truly was an extraordinary sight.

There couldn’t be that many folks out there who were as accepting of the people of the forest’s edge as Milano Mas and Nail, for example. But driven by the same shared feelings, they had all gathered together around me.

Thanks to my own carelessness I had fallen into a noble’s hands, and even afterwards I could only wait around to be saved, not even coming up with any

effective plans on my own. I really was a total idiot, and yet they had all gathered here, laughing and crying, and some even getting angry.

The group of southerners raising up containers of fruit wine and laughing boisterously were surely the carpenters who had helped out Pops.

As always, the easterners had their hoods shadowing their faces to the point that you couldn't tell what expressions they were making.

And the westerners were definitely the fewest in number, but there were still around 20 or so present. That included both regulars I often saw at the stalls, as well as folks like the cloth and metalware sellers.

Lastly, there were just as many people of the forest's edge present, all laughing and swinging about torches and the like. There were men and women in the crowd, and both familiar faces and ones I didn't recognize all that well. But all of them had bright, reassuring looks on their faces.

Also, looking closely into the background, there were over ten soldiers surrounding them at a distance, holding long spears. This was the sort of huge gathering that could easily end up on the wrong side of Genos's laws.

Still, I ultimately just stood there like an idiot, not knowing what to do... Before long, though, three figures approached as if realizing that.

Two of them were massive, while the other wasn't. It was Donda Ruu, Gazraan Rutim, and Rau Lea.

"Asuta, I'm glad to see you're alright," Gazraan Rutim called out, gripping my hand tightly.

"You too, Gazraan Rutim...? I really am sorry for worrying you."

"Don't be. Just seeing you alive and well is enough," he shot back with a gentle smile.

And from beside him, Rau Lea leaned his face in.

"Geez, don't go worrying me like that, Asuta. I mean, we were already right on the verge of our showdown with the nobles... Well, still, I guess it made things interesting in its own way." Rau Lea was just the same as always, too. He had the same smile and air about him, and his pale blue eyes remained sharp

like those of a hunting dog. “These past few days, we’ve been running all around the post town from morning till night. So you’ll need to feed us something awfully tasty to even the scales.”

“Right, sorry. I’ll make you as much food as you want.”

“I’m just kidding, dummy. It’s only natural to go running about like that for a comrade,” Rau Lea replied, reaching out and rustling my hair.

And then, there was Donda Ruu.

The man looked down at us with eyes like a wild beast and snorted, “Hmph, you don’t seem like you’re injured in any way. You’ll have to inform us of the details back at the forest’s edge.”

Then, not even giving me time to reply, Donda Ruu turned to face the crowd gathered there. And in a thundering voice, he shouted, “Asuta of the Fa clan has been safely retrieved from the noble’s manor! My apologies for the commotion we have caused in the post town over the course of these past five days! As one of the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge, Donda Ruu, you have both my gratitude and sincere apology!”

The townsfolk all shrunk a bit as they listened to those words. But they soon stood back up straight, and the cheers once more exploded forth.

“I’m glad you’re okay, Asuta!”

“Make us up some tasty food again, too!”

“If this made you sick of the town and you decide to hole up in the forest’s edge, then we’ll all come barging in after you!”

With that, I felt my chest tighten up and I couldn’t bring myself to respond. And so, I put everything I was feeling into a deep bow of my head instead.

At last, I had made it back to these people, all so very precious to me.

Epilogue: Confession

“Huh?! There were *that many* people of the forest’s edge in town searching for me every day?!” I asked Ai Fa as we sat in the spare house at the Ruu settlement.

Having changed into her usual attire from the forest’s edge, she replied, “Yes,” with a nod as she let down her long blonde hair.

This was after I had finished reporting on the past five days at the main Ruu house. Ai Fa had very much wanted to return home, but Donda Ruu firmly insisted we stay here for the night at least to guard against the nobles attempting to get revenge.

Aside from Darmu Ruu who was away at the moment, all the members of the main house had gathered and been awake despite how late it was, Granny Jiba included. And since Rimee Ruu had been too young to participate in the search, she clung to my side the whole time, crying and smiling away.

As for the members of the branch houses, they visited in turns and then reluctantly left. Even Dan Rutim came barging in, and so for a while it was as lively as a banquet.

“My apologies. My father Dan really was worried about you, Asuta... He was quite resentful that I wouldn’t yield my duty of heading to the post town to him,” Gazraan Rutim informed me later on. Apparently Dan Rutim had remained at the forest’s edge along with Jiza Ruu, where they were put in charge of all the clans under the Ruu.

“Of course, over half of the Ruu-aligned clan members were heading to town every day, so those who remained had to work quite hard.”

The Ruu men were currently on a break from work. But it was judged to be careless to have them all head out into the post town, so the search party was composed of 30 men and women each. The remaining men, meanwhile, guarded against an enemy attack while the women did their daily work.

Apparently they also decided to deploy that way because they figured leaving the search entirely up to such intense-looking men could prove troublesome. After all, investigating my whereabouts and the identities of the kidnappers meant talking to the townsfolk and guards. So in order to not scare the townsfolk too much while also protecting themselves, they split up into pairs of one man with one woman.

Perhaps it was obvious, but the one to come up with that plan had been Gazraan Rutim. And under Donda Ruu's banner as leading clan head, he himself had taken to the front lines and run about the post town.

"I really can't thank you all enough..." I whispered with a flood of emotions.

"What are you saying?" Ai Fa curtly shot back. "It's only natural for us to expend all our efforts when one of our own faces such a crisis. You're not saying you would hold back if another of our comrades met the same fate, are you, Asuta?"

"Of course not. I mean, there's no way."

"Then you should see that it's nothing to worry yourself over. Just feel gratitude instead."

Ai Fa's face was incredibly calm as she brushed her hair that was now hanging down.

Still, I found it sort of hard to picture 60 people of the forest's edge scurrying about the post town from morning till night. Did that really not cause too much friction with the guards and townsfolk?

"It was nothing serious. Our goal to start with was solely to find the locations of you and the kidnappers without disturbing order in the town. At first the guards shouted at us to return to the forest's edge, but then Donda Ruu roared back asking if they could find you in that case. After that, we heard no more such complaints."

"Hmm, I see..."

"Also, the Ruu are in the midst of a break period. It's just as Gazraan Rutim explained. Though there were members of many other clans worrying about you, they needed to continue with their hunting work despite the frustration

they felt. We were shouldering their thoughts too while heading into the post town, so I would like you to understand that fact as well,” Ai Fa stated, and then she gave a little sigh. “Among them, I was the only one to place my hunting work second. Fortunately, though, no one criticized me for that fact.”

“Yeah, so I’m really—”

“Stop that. There’s no reason for you to apologize. And also, the townsfolk other than the guards calmed down quite a bit once two days had passed. Reina Ruu and the others continuing to do business in their own way certainly had a positive impact.”

“Ah, so they managed to get the stalls running on the final day?”

“No, they did so from the day you were abducted up until today. Since they weren’t as skilled at handling myamuu as you are, they apparently solely sold giba burgers.”

My contract for the stalls was supposed to end three days ago. They must have managed to form a new contract with Milano Mas and kept on selling giba burgers all on their own.

Even more shockingly, they negotiated with Nail and Naudis and provided their inns with meals. But once again they couldn’t recreate the dishes I had made, so Reina Ruu offered the giba soup with tau oil that had become her specialty.

“‘Asuta will absolutely return. And so, we have to do what we can to maintain the bonds he formed in the post town.’ That is apparently what Reina Ruu said. And of course, they also helped out with the search after they wrapped up business each day.”

“Really...?”

“With their skills, they were the only ones who could handle that task... Though Reina Ruu may look childish, she has such strength hidden inside of her,” Ai Fa pensively stated, one arm resting atop her raised knee and propping up her cheek. “At any rate, we searched all of Genos aside from the castle town. Gazraan Rutim’s opinion had been that if they insisted they would not allow us inside the castle walls, our only option was to thrust back in their faces the fact

that those kidnappers were not hiding out in the post town, fields, or Turan land.”

“That sure is something. 60 people is a lot, but Genos is also huge, right?”

“Indeed. But we knew what those fiends looked like, and they had rather distinctive appearances at that. And it didn’t seem the guards were slacking at their jobs either, so we were able to finish our search by last night. With that, we were able to state with certainty that the villains were either within the castle town, or otherwise outside of Genos entirely.”

When she said that, Ai Fa cast her gaze downwards, as if to hide what she was feeling.

That must have been involuntary. But at any rate, her clenched fists also started to lightly tremble as she recalled her frustration.

“As Gazraan Rutim said, no matter how suspicious Cyclaeus may be, without proof we had no choice but to take that roundabout route. After all, the opinion had also been voiced that this was a plot by the people of the forest’s edge to trample all over the laws of Genos. And also that it could be a trap by someone like Jeeda with a grudge against either side to form a rift between us and Cyclaeus.”

In the end, it turned out to be a whim of Cyclaeus’s own daughter, Lefreya.

Nobody had been able to anticipate that little tyrant’s actions. Perhaps it could be said that they were so shortsighted and reckless that nobody could imagine anyone doing something that foolish.

“At any rate, for today the plan had been to have half our forces head outside of Genos while the remainder went into the castle town. We would have refused to budge until the guards allowed us through the gate.”

But then, Jeeda appeared.

Apparently he had waited along the path connecting the forest’s edge and the post town in order to deliver my message to Donda Ruu’s group.

With that, people split into the opinions that they should force their way into the castle town now that they knew where I was, or that they ultimately had to

respect the law. As they were in the midst of debating the matter, Zasshuma showed up for his regular check in.

“And then that Polarth noble guy came into the picture, huh? Who is he, exactly?”

“Yes, well... That Zasshuma man referred to using him as the ‘last resort.’ Kamyua Yoshu left instructions to rely on him when Melfried absolutely could not be of assistance.”

“Eh? So he’s a different collaborator, unrelated to Melfried?”

“Indeed. That Zasshuma man seemed rather reluctant to use him. But since it resulted in getting you back safely, it was clearly the correct choice,” Ai Fa said, and then she made a face like she was a bit lost in thought. “And I believe he used a word I wasn’t all too familiar with to refer to Polarth, but what was it...?”

“Wait, that sounds pretty important, so can you remember?”

“Ah, I’ve got it,” Ai Fa said, clapping her hands together in a way that was quite unlike her. “That Zasshuma man said, ‘He’s calculating, that one.’ Calculating means that one is often thinking of their own benefit, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. And I’d say it usually refers to a greedy obsession with money.”

Still, that word just didn’t feel like it fit that innocent-looking young man all that well.

Besides, would a noble really go seeking money and goods from the people of the forest’s edge? The kind of sum we could prepare certainly wouldn’t be enough to justify picking a fight with Cyclaeus. Seriously, just what was that man after?

“Coins, is it? They certainly are precious, but they cannot buy back a person’s life. And that goes even more so for the life of a precious comrade,” Ai Fa said, sidling up next to me. “That should be all that I wished to tell you. Was it enough to satisfy you?”

“Yeah. There’s still plenty I want to know, but I can wait till tomorrow to ask.”

Ai Fa stopped before my eyes and tilted her head.

“Tomorrow? Exactly what is it that you intend to do tomorrow, Asuta?”

“Hmm, Cyclaeus said he’d be offering an explanation around when the sun hits its peak, right? I can’t go running about doing my normal business before hearing the results from that, but first of all, I’d at least like to apologize to the inn owners again.”

“Yes, well you will have to run that by the leading clan heads first. In any case, I suppose we should get to sleep in order to be rested for tomorrow. We would have normally long since turned in by now, after all.”

It was true that there was that whole quarrel after the dinner around sunset, and then we returned to the forest’s edge and gave a detailed report at the Ruu house, and things ended up in a banquet-like commotion... By this point, it had to be four or five hours since the sun had set. It really might have been my first time staying up this late since coming to live at the forest’s edge.

“Alright then, let’s sleep. Hey, Ai Fa...”

“What is it? If it’s another apology, then I’ve already heard enough of those,” Ai Fa said with a frown as she tightly hugged my left arm. “It was Shin and Ludo Ruu’s guard to job you. So if anyone failed in that regard, it was them rather than you.”

“Yeah, but I promised to come back home safely, so—”

“And you’re here safe and sound, aren’t you?” she questioned, hugging my arm even tighter. “It’s fine now. Don’t make me speak so much of my emotions. If I let my guard down, I could end up showing you an unseemly sight again...” With that, she leaned up against the wall while still holding my arm, and then furthermore rested her head on my shoulder. “Well then, let’s sleep.”

“L-Like this?”

“At least for tonight, I do not feel like sleeping apart from you. Think of it as a punishment for worrying me.”

“No, but...” I tried to argue in my bewildered state, only for Ai Fa’s eyes to suddenly shoot wide open.

“It seems there’s something we must take care of first, though...”

Ai Fa grabbed hold of her blade and slowly rose, rage and animosity burning

brightly in her eyes.

“Wh-What is it? It couldn’t be—”

“We have a visitor. No matter what, do not let your guard down, Asuta.”

In long strides Ai Fa advanced over to the entrance, slipping by Gilulu who was sleeping in a ball, and violently pulled loose the bolt. She seemed far more impatient now than she had been the other day when Jeeda showed up.

“I’m amazed you would so brazenly show yourself before me, you fool,” she harshly called out into the darkness.

I hurriedly followed after Ai Fa, and peered over her shoulder at our visitor.

A tall figure in a hooded cloak was standing there inconspicuously... This was my first time seeing Sanjura in several days.

“It has been some time, Asuta,” he said, pulling back his hood and revealing his long chestnut-colored hair, unusual for someone with the features of an easterner, as well as his reddish-brown eyes. “I’m sure you must be, quite angry. Before I turned myself in to the guard station, I wanted to come, have a word with you.”

“The guard station, you say? So you’ll submit yourself to judgment out of remorse for your crimes?” Ai Fa questioned, her voice extremely full of rage.

Meanwhile, Sanjura faced her with the same gentle smile as always.

“My crimes... My apologies, but there is something more precious to me, than the law. And I simply had to act in accordance with that.”

“Quiet, you fool. You betrayed Asuta’s trust and friendship...” Ai Fa’s quietly responded as she gripped the handle of her blade. “Asuta also shares some blame for trusting a man such as you so lightly. However, that does not make your betrayal any lighter of a crime.”

“I do not mind, if you decide to hate me. But I believe I chose, the best path possible. Mussel would have tried to abduct Asuta, through any means necessary. If I did not lend him my aid, things could have turned out, far worse.”

“Sanjura, are you Cyclaeus’s servant...? Or maybe Lefreya’s?” I asked over Ai Fa’s shoulder as she blocked the doorway.

With the same smile as always, Sanjura gave a little nod.

“Yes. I am Cyclaeus’s servant. But the one who is important to me, is Lefreya.”

“I see... Then you really did get close to me under Cyclaeus’s orders?”

“Yes. I was summoned from Banarm, ten days ago. But since my right arm was injured, I was tasked with keeping an eye on you,” Sanjura replied, holding up his bandaged arm. “If it weren’t for this injury, I would have been given, more violent tasks... That is why I cut it myself.”

“What in the world? Exactly what are you thinking, living a life such as that?” Ai Fa angrily asked.

Still smiling away, Sanjura replied, “I think only of Lefreya. I caused Asuta suffering, solely to grant her wish. And for that, I apologize.”

“But why? Why is a man like you serving under someone like Cyc—”

“I cannot oppose Cyclaeus,” Sanjura answered, a gloomy sorrow in his eyes. “I have thought before, that he is the man I hate most in this world. But I cannot do anything to him. And so I quit hating him, and decided to love Lefreya instead.”



I had no idea whatsoever what he meant.

Sanjura, meanwhile, gave a small shake of his head and pulled his leather hood back up.

"I shall see trial, along with Mussel. However, I do not believe I shall lose my life, at least... However, Cyclaeus must surely be done with me, now that I have caused him this great shame. From here on out, I live only for Lefreya."

"What the heck? I can't understand your actions at all! If you hate Cyclaeus, then why not just cut all ties with him?! Leaving Genos should be enough to escape his reach, right?"

It seemed that Sanjura was still smiling under his hood. That same, gentle smile I had been so fond of...

"I'm sure no one would ever believe me, and Cyclaeus himself would certainly never acknowledge it, but I shall tell you. As an apology for the awful things I did to you, Asuta." At that point, numerous figures suddenly appeared around Sanjura. But rather than looking their way, he quietly stated, "I am Cyclaeus's son. Though our mothers differ, Lefreya is my younger sister. That is why I cannot sever ties with them..."

"Wha..."

"I will be heading, to the station. I ask that your blades please not be pointed at Lefreya. And I have no intention of fighting with the people of the forest's edge. After all, I am quite fond of your pure souls."

"A guy like you being fond of us is nothing but trouble..." one of the figures behind Sanjura chimed in, his voice trembling with rage.

It was Ludo Ruu.

In addition, Shin Ruu and two other young men were also out there in the dark. It was the full set of guards who had been watching over me five days back.

"Come on, how about we have a bit of a rumble rather than you saying you'll go quietly? I just can't hold my anger back this time around."

"I have no intention, of fighting."

With that, Sanjura pulled out his still sheathed sword and dropped it at Shin Ruu's feet.

As Shin Ruu picked it up, his eyes were burning even brighter with rage than Ludo Ruu's.

With a click of his tongue, Ludo Ruu kicked the ground.

"We're binding both your arms with rope. After bringing you in front of my old man, we'll be taking you to the station in town... Asuta, Ai Fa, sorry, but could we borrow the wagon again?"

With that, Ludo Ruu and company walked off with Sanjura, disappearing from sight.

Giving a little sigh, Ai Fa banged the door shut.

"What's with that man? You simply can't trust him."

"Yeah, but..."

"Don't say it. He was one of your kidnappers, which makes him an enemy." Though the anger burning in her eyes had abated, they were still full of intense emotion. "Don't go feeling unnecessary pity, Asuta. At least for now, our path and the one walked by that man do not overlap in the least."

"For now, huh...?"

Did that mean Ai Fa had her own thoughts on the matter, then?

At any rate, she broke out in another serious pout as she tightly hugged my left arm again.

"Worry about things tomorrow! For tonight, it's well past time to sleep!"

"Gyah!"

Since Ai Fa pulled excessively hard, we ended up tumbling down to the floor.

Even so, she didn't loosen her grip on my arm at all. And her sweet-smelling blonde hair splayed out wildly atop my chest.

I could feel Ai Fa's warmth and weight from atop me.

The giba fur beneath my body felt stiff.

My eyes could see the flickering flame from the candle, as well as the exposed wooden beams of the ceiling.

I had finally returned to the forest's edge... I don't know how many times that thought had occurred to me by this point, but I was feeling it strongly now.

"Though I lost my beloved father, I'm now here with you, Asuta," Ai Fa soon whispered, the intense emotion now gone from her voice. "So even if he has a detestable father, as long as he has a sister he loves, then he isn't so unfortunate after all..." she quietly added, her eyes closing.

And then a voice so faint I wasn't even sure I was really hearing it whispered, "People need someone they can feel close to... As long as you have that, you can keep on living resolutely, no matter the adversity you may face."

"Yeah," I quietly replied.

Unable to hold back the impulse to do so, I patted my hand down atop Ai Fa's head.

With a pleased sigh from her nose, she nestled her head up against my chest. And so, these long, long five days at last came to a close.

Intermezzo: Adventure Down Drunkard Way

1

On that day, there was a great tumult throughout the Genos post town from the morning onward. The reason behind that went without saying. Yesterday, Asuta of the forest's edge, who had been doing business in the town, had been abducted by someone.

While she was helping out at the inn run by her family, Yumi had learned of that fact. And when she first heard it, she thought it was just a bad joke. Once she realized it was true, her head became a chaotic mess of anger and sadness, unable to even form proper thoughts. Still, she somehow managed to get in contact with her buddies and run around town with them till sunset, yet Asuta was nowhere to be found.

Though it was now a brand new day, it was hard to say that her emotions had calmed down in the least. When she woke up she was told to prepare the midday meals for the customers, so she had to head into the kitchen. But the whole time, emotions far hotter than the stove's flames burned in her chest.

Yumi's family made a living running an inn known as The Westerly Wind. It was an old, cheap place that served the thugs and poor folks about town. But it at least certainly wasn't small, so there were no shortage of people who stayed there. And as she boiled up some meat and veggies for those customers, Yumi put together her plan for the day.

"My, the town's still in such a commotion. Look how long it took me to handle a single shopping trip!" her mother proclaimed as she returned holding a large bundle.

"A commotion? Did they find the guys who took Asuta?" Yumi asked.

As her mother sat the bundle down on a table, she replied, "No," with a shake of her head. "But the people of the forest's edge have come streaming into town. And seeing that, the guards have been running about in a fluster, causing

a huge mess.”

“The people of the forest’s edge aren’t planning on heading to the castle, are they?”

“No, it seems they intend to search the town themselves for their abducted comrade. If they tried to push their way into the castle, then that really would end in bloodshed.”

“I see,” Yumi said with a big sigh.

Apparently, the people of the forest’s edge were having some sort of quarrel with the nobles in the castle town. Considering the timing, it would make sense to think Asuta’s abduction was the doing of some noble, but they would be seen as criminals if they tried to force their way into the castle town without passes. And so, Yumi felt truly relieved to hear they weren’t flying completely off the handle.

“Anyway, I went ahead and bought fuwano too. Once you’re done with the stew, I’ll need help with that too.”

“Huh? But I’ve got business to take care of after this.”

“What business is that, exactly? With the guards and people of the forest’s edge wandering all over town, this is no time to be going out.”

“But I can’t just leave Asuta be!” Yumi shot back, only for her mother to break out in a worried look.

“There’s really no helping this. If the culprit actually is a noble, nobody will be able to bring them to justice. I’m sorry to say it, but it’s best to just forget about the people of the forest’s edge and giba cooking and all that.”

“But why?! You said Asuta’s cooking was really, really tasty too, right, Mom?!”

That was why Yumi was in the middle of trying to have her parents purchase giba meat cooking to sell at The Westerly Wind. Since her mother had also been eating Asuta’s cooking for some time, she hadn’t been all that opposed to the idea. No, the one who was against it was her father. But she continued trying, and eventually Yumi got her father to agree to meet with Asuta, but then this whole disaster happened and set things back.

“But you know we can’t go against nobles. If the folks from the castle set their eyes on us, they could crush this inn in no time flat.”

“That’ll never happen! And besides, are you saying nobles can just do whatever they want?!”

“Nobles can only be judged by other nobles. We can’t do anything to them at all.”

Now good and truly mad, Yumi threw the firewood she had been holding to the ground.

“I’m not giving up, no matter what! I won’t just let the nobles mess with Asuta!”

“Ah, hold on, Yumi...!”

“The stew’s already cooked! You can bake the fuwano yourself, Mom!” Yumi yelled as she ran from the kitchen.

She kept on going straight out of the inn and toward the main road. These slums had a bad reputation even for the post town, and the guards wouldn’t even set foot in the place. But since Yumi was born and raised in the area, it was pretty much her back yard.

Genos was a prosperous town. According to visitors, it was either the first or second most well off in all of the Western Kingdom of Selva. However, almost all that wealth was gathered in the castle town, while it wasn’t rare at all for folks to die of starvation out here in the slums.

The castle town was protected by stone walls that reached higher than the roofs of houses. Going from one side of those walls to the other was like stepping into a different world. Yumi would likely never step inside them, and it was completely unimaginable that any nobles from the castle would visit this area. To folks from the slums, nobles might as well have been some kind of celestial being living up above the clouds.

So that means they’re allowed to do stuff like this?!

As that thought ran through her head, Yumi dashed out onto the main road, which ran straight down the center of the post town. There were large houses

and shops lined up on either side of it, and it was full of people walking this way and that from dawn till dusk. The business carried out by these people really did bring a lot of wealth into Genos.

However, things were different today. Like her mother had said, there was a sense of danger hanging in the air. There were an awful lot of guards out along the road, and also, she could spy hunters of the forest's edge here and there in their giba pelt cloaks.

It wasn't as if there was any sort of commotion going on. But the tension lingering about was almost palpable. Any merchants or travelers that had no interest in the situation were all looking down and walking quickly, as if to avoid getting caught up in it all.

It's just like back then...

She was thinking of the time when the criminals from the forest's edge had the post town in a panic.

There had been a turbulent feel like this about town back then, too. And it hadn't gone away until the criminals paid with their lives.

Argh! And things had been really moving in a good direction thanks to Asuta and everyone else... Yumi thought while grinding her teeth, only to spy a familiar face approaching from the other side of the street. It was one of her buddies, the son of a bar owner.

"Hey, you're late. Did your dad try to stop you?"

"I had a big fight with him first thing in the morning, so we're not even talking. How are things around town...?"

"Do I even need to answer that? I mean, just look around. Earlier, it seemed like the guards and the people of the forest's edge were both ready to draw their blades at any moment, so I guess it's calmed down a bit since then."

"I see... What about the guys who abducted Asuta? You still haven't found any leads?"

"Nope. We went around to all the inns, but there was no one who fit the bill. If he was kidnapped by a noble, he's got to be inside the stone walls, right...?"

With a “Damn!” Yumi kicked the ground. “Isn’t there any way to sneak inside those walls? Is there anyone around who does business with somebody from the castle or something?”

“There’s no way anyone from a place that well off would hang out with guys like us. You’re not thinking of trying to climb up the stone walls, are you? Because that really will get you skewered.”

Yumi glanced about the street, biting her lip.

Though it was a whole lot livelier here than in the slums, the folks doing business were still all commoners. They couldn’t even defy the guards, much less nobles.

And yet, yesterday folks from around the post town really did stand up against the guards. That vegetable seller who was so fond of Asuta, that other inn owner, and several more pushed their way into the guard station and insisted they find the bastards who kidnapped Asuta.

Perhaps as a result of their efforts, the guards soon sent out search parties to find the culprits. It helped that the owner of The Sledgehammer who was there during the kidnapping had seen their faces. Using the wanted posters that had been put out as a guide, Yumi and her friends had searched up until it got dark out... but they still hadn’t found so much as a single lead.

As she trembled with regret, Yumi’s buddy called out, “Hey, for now, why don’t we get something to eat? I’ve been running around all morning, so I’m starving.”

“Yeah, you go do that. I’m not in the mood, though.”

“Really? If you take too long, other folks’ll eat up all the giba cooking.”

“Huh?” Yumi questioned, turning and shooting a glare without thinking. “You’re talking about giba cooking even though Asuta’s missing? Are you seriously drunk this early in the morning?”

“Don’t shoot me such a scary look, geez. The people of the forest’s edge are running their stalls without Asuta.”

That news left Yumi feeling truly, thoroughly shocked.

And she felt something like a glowing ember lighting up in the depths of her chest.

“Why are they taking it easy and running stalls at a time like this? Do they care more about coins than they do about Asuta?”

“I didn’t ask, so I’ve got no clue. Why not ask them in person if you’ve gotta know?”

“Alright... That’s just what I’ll do.”

Yumi headed north down the road. That was the direction where all the stalls were laid out, and Asuta’s two were positioned all the way at the far northern extreme.

As she went, she actually didn’t pass anyone from the forest’s edge. Even though a lot of hunters were in town, they probably only amounted to a few dozen at most. That just seemed to be even more evidence of how lightly they were treating this matter with Asuta, which made Yumi all the more angry.

Before long, a crowd appeared in front of her.

Apparently even on a day like today, business was still booming.

The majority of the customers looked like they came from Jagar or Sym. However, around 20 percent or so seemed to be citizens of Selva. All in all, that was pretty much the same proportions as always.

As she suppressed the rage bubbling up inside her, Yumi joined the line along with her buddy. Though it was frustrating to admit, the smell wafting through the air was still delicious, even without Asuta around.

“Welcome. That’ll be two coins,” the girl manning the stall said when Yumi’s turn came around.

“Hey, you—!” Yumi shouted in a hostile voice, only to suddenly catch her breath.

The one manning the stall was that black haired girl who started alternating with Vina Ruu. Though she didn’t look like Vina Ruu at all, apparently she was the girl’s younger sister. She was small, had a bit of a childish face, and had very well proportioned features. And right now, she was desperately forcing a smile,

her eyes red from crying.

“Ah... You’re the daughter of that inn, the one who’s always stopping by. Thank you for coming even on a day like this.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah...”

“Just the one? It will be ready shortly.”

After saying that, she swiftly put together a giba burger.

Once she had accepted it and handed over her coins, Yumi slid on over to the side of the stall.

“Hey, what exactly are you all doing continuing to do business on a day like this?”

“Huh?” the girl questioned, looking confused.

However, since the next customer soon offered their coins, she was left unable to answer Yumi’s query.

With that, the red-haired girl helping out at the other stall slid over toward them. She had been working the stalls for some time now too, and her name was Lala Ruu. From what Yumi knew, she was another of Vina Ruu’s little sisters.

“Reina, I’ll take over. At least for today, it’s important to talk to folks from around town, right?”

“Yeah, thanks. In that case, I’ll leave things to you for just a bit.”

After entrusting Lala Ruu with her work, the black-haired girl named Reina came out from the rear of the stall and approached Yumi.

If she was a relative of those other girls, then that must have meant her name was Reina Ruu. At any rate, the first thing she did was face Yumi’s group and bow.

“My apologies for once again causing a commotion in town. But I hope you’ll believe me when I say that we hold no animosity toward you townsfolk.”

“R-Right. I didn’t think that was the case or anything... But anyway, why are you carrying on with running your business even though Asuta’s been

kidnapped?”

“Well, we believed it wouldn’t do to let the bonds Asuta has put so much effort into forging be severed by this. And so, we members of the Ruu are trying to hold those bonds with the townsfolk in place until he returns.”

Until he returns... Yumi felt a shocking amount of warmth behind those words.

“I see. Then you haven’t given up on Asuta either. I thought for sure that—”

“Asuta will absolutely return. He has already overcome great peril, time and time again,” Reina Ruu firmly stated.

And though her eyes were still red from crying, there was a strong light shining in them too. Despite how childish her looks might have been, this girl was still a person of the forest’s edge. And it seemed Yumi still didn’t fully comprehend just how tough they really were.

“Once we’re finished with work, we’ll also switch to searching for Asuta. Of course, we have to prepare to run the stalls tomorrow too, so we can’t spend all that much time... But still, we want to do absolutely everything that we can.”

“Right, I get you. We’ve been running all about town too. We’ll get Asuta back, no matter what it takes.”

With that, Reina Ruu broke out in a brilliant smile.

“All of you have been making an effort, too? On behalf of the people of the forest’s edge, I give you my thanks.”

“Yeah, I definitely want to thank you too,” Yumi said, taking a bite out of the giba burger she was holding. “Man, this is good! It’s about as tasty as the ones Asuta makes.”

“Thank you... However, in regards to the giba burger, we members of the Ruu clan have actually been making them for some time now.”

“Huh?! Really?!”

“Yes. Asuta’s skills are still necessary to prepare the myamuu giba, though, which is why both stalls are only selling giba burgers today.”

“I see. That’s amazing! You shouldn’t have any issues doing business, then.”

“Right. Despite all the commotion, our number of customers hasn’t been dropping. In fact, it seems like it’s been on the rise... It’s all because Asuta overturned the customs of the forest’s edge and formed such bonds with the townsfolk.”

At that point, the violent emotions that had been smoldering away in Yumi’s chest vanished completely. Thinking back on it, there was no way anyone as earnest as the people of the forest’s edge could go and simply abandon one of their comrades. Yumi secretly felt ashamed at her foolishness for thinking so.

“Well then, give it your all! If we learn anything, I’ll come let you know right away!”

“Right. Thank you so much.”

Waving to Reina Ruu as she went, Yumi headed back down the road along with her buddy. Her friend had remained silent the whole time, but now he took a bite of his giba burger and gave a sigh.

“The women of the forest’s edge are all so pretty. Man, I just can’t get enough of that smile of hers...”

“Hey, don’t go looking at people of the forest’s edge like that!”

“What the heck? You’re always looking at Asuta that way, aren’t you, Yumi?”

“Don’t be stupid! That’s not how it is!” Yumi shouted, giving her buddy a firm kick in the rear. “Anyway, we’ve got to help out, too! We’ve got to hit up all the places thugs hang out, not just the inns!”

“Owww... They’ve got other people doing that already. And besides, even the post town alone is seriously huge. We can’t exactly cover the place in a day or two.”

“Then we’ll just have to do it in three or four! Stop complaining about it, already!”

“I’m not complaining. I mean, I’ve got no intention of just leaving Asuta to his fate, either,” her buddy replied, tossing the last of the giba burger into his mouth.

The boy had once been prejudiced against the people of the forest's edge, too. In fact, when Asuta first started doing business in the post town, Yumi and her buddies had intentionally gone to hassle him.

But before they knew it they had become regulars at his stalls, and were now running around town for his sake. That was just the sort of bonds Asuta had formed with folks from around town.

I'll never let something like this destroy what he built! Yumi thought to herself, only for her buddy walking alongside her down the road to go, "Ah. Some other people I know were supposed to be checking this street. I'll meet up with them, so can I leave Drunkard Way to you?"

"Yeah, since that place is dangerous if you're not a local."

Drunkard Way was the street nestled deepest in the section of town where The Westerly Wind was located. Even fearless ruffians needed to work up some serious resolve to head that far into the slums.

"Will you really be alright on your own though, Yumi? I can get some men together too if you need them."

"If we go as a big group, it'll just put folks on edge, and we don't need that. And I'm at least as good at running away as the rest of you, so there's nothing to worry about."

"Got it. I'll see you later, then," her buddy shot back before taking off running down a side street.

Having finished off her giba burger, Yumi also swiftly headed back down the road. She wasn't exactly fond of the idea of setting foot in Drunkard Way, but she also couldn't go leaving the place out of a search for the sort of lowlifes who'd go around kidnapping people.

By the time she had made it back to her starting point, she was suddenly taken aback. That was because there were now people of the forest's edge just about to walk down the side path toward the slums.

"H-Hold on! Where are you two going?"

The two of them turned her way.

One was a hunter clad in a giba fur pelt, while the other was a woman dressed in the attire of the forest's edge. The man was quite large and had a robust figure, while the woman was small and rotund.

"Excuse me, but who are you...?"

"I-I'm Yumi, from The Westerly Wind, and I wouldn't recommend going down that way carelessly. That place is a hangout for drunken scoundrels, even in the middle of the day!"

"A hangout for scoundrels... Then that's all the more reason we need to search it."

Though the large man looked quite intimidating, his voice was calm and relaxed. And honestly, his face wasn't the least bit frightening. Though it was fittingly masculine for his build, his gaze was nice and refreshing and his expression was gentle. Somehow, he had the feel of a large, sturdy tree about him.

"I'm sure you're confident in your skills as a hunter of the forest's edge... But the sorts who hang out down that way are seriously troublesome. And you all don't want to cause a commotion about town either, right?"

"That's true. But we must be thorough and search everywhere. Otherwise, we won't be able to convince the folks from the castle town."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"We wish to prove that Asuta is not anywhere outside of the castle town. Then the intention is to negotiate with the nobles in order to gain permission to search the castle town, too," the hunter of the forest's edge said, then he suddenly broke out in a grin. "My apologies for the late introduction, but I am Gazraan Rutim, from the Rutim clan of the forest's edge. This is my younger sister Morun. You have my gratitude for your concern, Yumi of The Westerly Wind."

That was how Yumi and Gazraan Rutim met.

And also, it was the start of the modest adventure they would have that day.

Yumi was walking through the slums, accompanied by two people of the forest's edge.

They still hadn't stepped too far in, so it wasn't as if there had been much change in their surroundings. However, since there were more guards out on the main road than usual, the residents of the slums also seemed to be cautiously holing up in their houses.

"This part of the post town is where especially poor folks and guys with shady pasts gather. It's the sort of place even guards won't set foot in alone."

"I see. It doesn't appear all that different from the main street, though."

"That's because this is just the outskirts of the slums. But you need to be more and more careful the farther in you go."

As Yumi said that, a familiar signboard came into view: the one for her family's place, The Westerly Wind. And so, she moved swiftly past, using Gazraan Rutim's large frame to shield her from view.

"Sorry, but help hide me for a bit. If my parents see me, they'll try to force me to come back home."

"You're trying to help Asuta, even though it means defying your parents, Yumi?"

"Of course I am. That's what friends are for, right?"

Hearing that, Gazraan Rutim's eyes gently narrowed as he looked down at Yumi.

"Yes. Asuta is an irreplaceable friend to me, too. It makes me very happy to hear that there is someone in town who feels the same way about him."

"Geez, you're making me embarrassed, getting all serious like that."



And so, Yumi made it past The Westerly Wind, hiding in Gazraan Rutim's shadow as she went.

Before long, they reached a four-way intersection in the path. By this point, the buildings lined up on either side of the street had started looking rather shabby. The poverty suffered by the folks living there made it difficult for them to scrape together the money for repairs.

"We're going to keep heading straight, since we already searched the rest of the area yesterday."

"This is a huge help. Morun and I had been planning on spending the whole day searching the area."

"The real troublesome bit is Drunkard Way, though, which is up ahead. There are heaps of folks there you just can't reason with," Yumi replied as she looked over at the other member of their party. "Are you going to be alright? It isn't really the sort of place young women should be going, normally."

"But you're a young woman too, aren't you?" Morun Rutim asked back with a truly innocent-looking smile.

She was a very adorable girl, and really didn't resemble her brother in the least. She was a bit on the plump side, but she was much more charming than some girl who looked like she was wasting away. Her cute little eyes positively sparkled, and her round cheeks looked incredibly soft.

"I'm fifteen. How old are you, Yumi?"

"Me? I'm sixteen."

"sixteen, huh? You look so very mature."

Well, by the time you hit sixteen in the post town, you weren't really treated like a kid anymore. In fact, her parents had started bugging her about getting married lately.

"If your younger sister here is fifteen, then you can't be all that old either, right?"

"I'm twenty-four. The main Rutim house has four children besides me, and I am the oldest while Morun is the youngest."

“Five kids, huh? I know it’s the same way with the Ruu, so you people of the forest’s edge sure must have a lot of children!”

“Yes. Birthing many children is an important task for the people of the forest’s edge.”

It was quite the unusual experience for Yumi, chatting away with people of the forest’s edge at the side of the road like this. In fact, this was probably the first time she’d really had a proper conversation with any of them to start with.

“By the way, how many of you are in town today?”

“Roughly 60. We split into pairs of one man and woman each, and have been searching all the way from the Turan land north of the castle town to the plantations south of the post town.”

60 people of the forest’s edge coming into town certainly was a big deal. And half of them were brawny hunters, so it was no real surprise the townsfolk were scared out of their wits.

Even so, Yumi couldn’t help but feel a bit displeased.

“But there are hundreds of you people of the forest’s edge, right? You could only get 60 of them to come?”

“Yes. There were a great many more who said they wanted to assist in the search for Asuta, but they had to be forbidden from doing so. Currently the Ruu and their affiliated clans are in the midst of a break period, so it ended up being 60 of us who’ve come to town, after excluding the very young and old from our numbers.”

“A break period?”

“That’s right. Three times a year, we are able to take time off from hunting giba. The Ruu and those allied with them, like us, happen to be in such a period.”

“Hmm, I see,” Yumi said, considering dropping the matter there. But ultimately, she decided she needed to say it. “Sorry, but let me ask... Are you saying hunting giba is more important than Asuta...?”

“You see, if we put our hunting second for this matter, there’s a concern the

nobles from the castle town will attack us over that.”

“You’re not scared of the nobles, are you...?”

“We need to consider the possibility that this whole incident was aimed at creating an excuse to place blame on the people of the forest’s edge.”

The people of the forest’s edge were tasked with the harsh work of hunting giba, under orders from the nobles of Genos. If they neglected that job, then they wouldn’t be able to take issue with the nobles coming after them for it.

“That all sounds like one big complicated mess... So you’re thinking it’s the nobles of Genos behind all this after all?”

“We still don’t know. There’s a possibility it was done by someone wishing to cause a rift between our people and the nobles.”

“Ah, yeah, it wouldn’t be odd at all for there to be idiots like that out there... But I feel like lately more and more townsfolk have been thinking differently, thanks to all the stuff Asuta and the others have done,” Yumi said. Then with a sigh, she stared way up at Gazraan Rutim’s face. “It really is a shame that this had to happen now... The townsfolk may end up feeling terrified of you people of the forest’s edge again as a result.”

“That may be so. However, there are those such as you who are thinking of us, too,” Gazraan Rutim replied with a gentle smile. “This time around there haven’t been townsfolk shouting at us to ‘go back to the forest,’ so I would say a good bit has changed since last time. In fact, more than anything, I have been sensing the townsfolk’s distrust toward the nobles growing.”

“Yeah, that’s true. I mean, this time around Asuta got kidnapped by thugs, so it really would be odd for anyone to attack the people of the forest’s edge over that.”

“It’s very reassuring to hear you say so,” Gazraan Rutim calmly said back as another intersection appeared before them.

At that point Yumi stopped and looked at the truly dissimilar siblings.

“Up ahead is the notorious Drunkard Way. Let me ask again... You really won’t just leave it up to me?”

“We won’t. If it is that questionable of a place, then I really would prefer to check it with my own two eyes.”

“Alright. To be honest, I wasn’t exactly confident I could search every nook and cranny of the place on my own, so I’m glad to hear you say that. But, well... Just make sure not to let your guard down, alright? Without a doubt, this is the most dangerous place in all of the post town.”

Gazraan Rutim just silently nodded back.

He didn’t look timid in the least. Honestly, it seemed reasonable that such a burly hunter might well be able to take down the sorts of villains who hung out in Drunkard Way as easily as a big giiz rat.

“Well then, let’s get going. And be careful.”

Working up her resolve, Yumi stepped into the street.

All of the wooden buildings lined up on either side of the street had a real shabby, seedy look about them. To folks who only knew the bustling main street, the place would probably look rundown and deserted. And on top of all that, there was a lingering smell of rot hanging in the air.

“It’s quiet... But I can sense a great number of gazes on us.”

“Yeah. Everyone must be peering out at the unfamiliar visitors.”

After a quick shiver, Yumi approached a nearby building.

When she knocked on the door, a hostile voice shot back, “What do you want?”

“We’re searching for someone. We won’t cause you any trouble, but could we talk to you for a bit?”

The door remained shut. However, there were some gaps here and there where the boards had rotted, and a human eye peered out of one of them.

“Calling for me like this is already plenty enough trouble. I don’t know anything, so go try somewhere else,” the voice shot back. It seemed like it belonged to an old woman, and her light brown eye looked incredibly untrusting.

“Please, just listen to what we have to say. We’re residents of the same town, aren’t we?”

“A girl dressed as pretty as you are seems like an outsider to me...”

“I see, I haven’t introduced myself. I’m the daughter of The Westerly Wind’s owners, that inn that’s just a little down the road. That makes me a part of the neighborhood, wouldn’t you say?”

Through the gap, the old woman’s eye narrowed suspiciously.

“The Westerly Wind, is it? Then could you tell me the owner’s name?”

“Well I wouldn’t exactly go forgetting my own dad’s name. The owner’s name is Sams, while his wife is Sill. Well, I say he’s the owner, but my dad’s the one who married into the family.”

There was a rattling sound, and soon the wooden door swung open. It seemed despite how rotten the door itself had grown, it had still been properly bolted.

“So you’re Sill’s daughter? Unlike your mom, you’re a real looker, aren’tcha?”

“Hey, don’t go badmouthing her like that. But, well, I have heard I look more like my dad.”

“Hmph. So who are you looking for exactly, girl? And who are those two...?”

“They’re people of the forest’s edge. You’ve at least heard of them, right, ma’am?”

Gazraan and Morun Rutim just gave a silent bow. As she looked at the calm and collected pair, the old woman gave a “Hmph!” and continued on, “This is my first time ever seeing any giba eaters up this close. What are you trying to do, bringing along people like them?”

“Like I said, we’re looking for someone: a guy named Asuta who was abducted along the main street, and the kidnappers who took him. Umm, Asuta has black hair and eyes, and he’s a sort of cute seventeen-year-old, while the kidnappers—” Yumi replied, only to hesitate, so Gazraan Rutim stepped in.

“The ones who kidnapped Asuta were a dark skinned man with the appearance of an easterner, and a firmly built westerner. They are already

wanted throughout the post town for the abduction.”

“Hmph. There are troublemakers here and there all throughout the neighborhood, but I can’t say I’ve seen any easterners.”

“Apparently he was born with mixed blood from the east and west, to be more accurate. His name is Sanjura, and he has light brown hair and eyes, which is unusual for an easterner.”

“I don’t know anything about all that. If you wanna ask about something like that, you should go talk to Dattas.”

“Dattas? Who’s that?”

“He’s the one who manages all the scoundrels in the area. When an outsider settles down here, the first thing they’ve gotta do is introduce themselves to Dattas.”

“Is that so? You have our thanks,” Gazraan Rutim said with a bow, while the old lady slammed the door shut before he even finished.

“Where exactly does this Dattas person live...?”

“H-Hold on a moment. You’re planning on barging into a place like that? I mean, there’s no way the guy running Drunkard Way is going to be anywhere close to an honest man.”

“But that would be a lot quicker than going from house to house like this, wouldn’t you say?”

Yumi gave a deep sigh, and then brushed aside her long hair.

“Alright, I guess I’ll put my trust in your strength. Hey old lady! Where should we go to meet that Dattas guy?”

“It’s the house with the red roof, halfway down the street!” a voice shouted back from inside the house.

Relying on that advice, they headed further down the road, and sure enough a very clearly red roof came into view. It certainly wasn’t rare to paint a house, but this stuff seemed to have been put on quite some time ago. And so, the red had darkened and made it look like the house had been splattered in a sea of blood, giving it a real eerie appearance.

After taking a few calming breaths, Yumi knocked on the door to that creepy building.

“Does this house belong to a guy named Dattas? We have something we’d like to ask him.”

For a fair while, there was no response at all.

But eventually, the door ominously creaked open, revealing a man who was even larger than Gazraan Rutim.

“Who are you lot...? What business do you have with Dattas...?”

“We’d like to ask about the new faces who have popped up in the area lately,” Yumi firmly replied, following the customs of the slums. Around here, letting your weakness show could prove deadly. “I’m Yumi from The Westerly Wind, and these two are Gazraan and Morun Rutim of the forest’s edge. We’ve got no desire to cause trouble for you folks. We just want to talk for a bit.”

“People of the forest’s edge...?” the large man questioned, glaring at Gazraan Rutim with a dangerous look in his eyes.

While Gazraan Rutim was already a head taller than Yumi, this man was another half a head taller on top of that. Plus, his limbs were as thick as logs, and his stomach jutted out stoutly. It was like his whole body was a size bigger than Gazraan Rutim’s.

Before the mountain of a man could say another word, though, a cheerful voice called out through a curtained window, “Hey, let them in already! Let me have a look at these people of the forest’s edge!”

The large man didn’t stop facing them down for a second, but he did step back through the door as ordered.

Though her hand was coated in a cold sweat, Yumi balled it into a fist and followed after him.

As soon as she stepped inside, she found herself in a hallway. It was rather long too, and they followed it to the end where it split off to the left and the right. The large man went down the right, and so Yumi and company did the same.

This house seemed like it had been constructed in a really unusual way. The owner's voice before must have come from a room in the front, but you had to go down this winding complex path to get there from the entrance. Yumi didn't really want to think too deeply on what the meaning behind that was.

"Welcome, dear guests. This is my first time inviting people of the forest's edge into my home."

There were five men in the room, and a round table with chairs circling it like you'd see in a bar. It was the man farthest into the room who called out to them.

He was a short little man. Even if he was standing, he would probably still be smaller than Yumi. His limbs were slender, and it was hard to imagine them having much strength behind them at all. He had a real seedy appearance and his hair was rather thinned out. Only his eyes seemed to be moving. Was he even older than Yumi's father...?

"I am the owner of this house, Dattas. Exactly what business do you have with me?"

It seemed like there was no need to introduce themselves again, so she skipped ahead to asking the same question she had to the old woman from before.

"I see, a thug with the look of an easterner, is it...? I've heard rumors of someone like that coming to dwell in the neighborhood lately, though I can't say he's ever come by to introduce himself."

"Huh?! Really?!" Yumi asked, enthusiastically leaning forwards.

Dattas's cronies, meanwhile, broke out in amused grins.

"I don't tell any lies that don't earn me a profit. But I can't see any reason to tell the truth if it won't earn me any coins either."

"You're saying you want to be paid somehow? We don't exactly have much on us."

"Is that so? You know, it's not nice to be stingy..."

Yumi stepped forward as if to act as a shield for Morun Rutim, furrowing her

brows a bit as she did so.

“If you’re having improper thoughts, you’d be smart to forget them,” Yumi warned. “But if you want my necklaces or bracelets, I’ll give you whatever you want.”

“I’ve got no use for such cheap accessories. Why not try to force it out of me, though?” Dattas said with a shrug of his slender shoulders. “That said, I don’t care to bloody up my house. Instead, how about we have a contest of strength here and now, for a bit of entertainment?”

“A contest of strength?”

“Don’t you men do that at festivals and the like? It’s not like I’d have much of a chance, but this fella here’s pretty confident in his strength.”

Naturally, he was referring to that large man who had greeted them at the door. And the man was glaring straight at Gazraan Rutim now, not even so much as grinning.

“If you can beat him in a contest of strength, I’ll tell you where that thug is. But if you lose, let’s see... Yes, how about you let me have that blade you’ve got dangling from your hip? That seems much more useful than some mere baubles.”

“Dattas, could you get them to throw in that giba pelt? It’d be proof we beat a hunter of the forest’s edge in a contest of strength, so it’d make for a nice trophy,” one of the hangers-on called out, causing Dattas to break out in a grin.

“That’s a fine idea. What do you say, Mr. Hunter of the Forest’s Edge?”

“I don’t mind, but how will it be decided?” Gazraan Rutim questioned, his expression unchanged.

Dattas looked more and more pleased as he replied, “I don’t think we need to worry about anything too complicated. What do you say to the idea that the first one to hit the floor loses?”

“That would be the same as what we do at the festival of the hunt, so I have no complaints,” Gazraan Rutim answered as he took his still sheathed blade from his hip and handed it to Morun Rutim. “Is hitting and kicking acceptable?”

In our contests of strength at the forest's edge, such actions are forbidden.”

“That wouldn't be any fun at all. Just having you two grapple with one another sounds like a real bore, doesn't it?”

“I'm fine either way. I'm not exactly seeking a thrill or anything of the sorts here,” Gazraan Rutim calmly replied.

On the other hand, the blood was clearly rising to the large man's face. It seemed Gazraan Rutim's calm and composed nature was really getting to him.

“Alright, clear a space! This match'll be a single round! Well, not that I figure you'll be up for a second go afterwards...”

With Dattas's signal, the men pushed the table and chairs up against the wall. Dattas alone remain seated, and ultimately the space was cleared up in front of him.

Gazraan Rutim and the large man stepped into the center of the newly cleared space. Without thinking, Yumi grabbed hold of Morun Rutim's hand, only for the girl to smile back at her.

“You don't need to worry. Gazraan is in the top eight fighters among all the hunters under the Ruu.”

Dattas shakily raised his arm up above his head, and then swiftly swung it down.

“Begin!”

The large man instantly grabbed for Gazraan Rutim.

The hunter's fur cloak lightly fluttered... and in the next instant, the large man's back slammed into the floor.

It was impossible to tell just what had happened. The quake reached all the way to Yumi's feet, and the large man moaned in anguish.

“Are you alright? You're quite heavy, so that may have been rather painful,” Gazraan Rutim asked, sounding genuinely concerned, but the man could only groan in response. Looking carefully, his body was partially sunken into the wooden floor.

“I was holding back, so you shouldn’t suffer any lasting injuries. But we can count this as my victory, yes?” Gazraan Rutim asked, slowly turning to face Dattas.

The man’s right arm still dangled where it had swung down, as he wore a baffled expression like that of a child.

3

“I’ve heard a thug from the east settled down recently in old lady Jillel’s rundown row house,” Dattas had informed them.

There was a concern he was trying to get even with them in some way, but it seemed more that he was completely overwhelmed by Gazraan Rutim’s extraordinary strength. In fact, his face actually looked full of admiration.

“I don’t know what sorta thug he is, but as long as he doesn’t go acting like a big man around here, then it’s got nothing to do with me. Still, guys from Sym are trouble, so I don’t want anything to do with them if I don’t have to. And you should take care, too,” he had earnestly added.

As they looked for the place Dattas had told them about, Gazraan Rutim asked Yumi, “What did he mean when he said folks from Sym are trouble? From what I have heard, that Sanjura man is formidable enough to prove a match for even hunters of the forest’s edge.”

“Hmm? Isn’t that because of the poison they use rather than their actual strength? They say you need ten swordsmen to take down one guy from Sym, after all.”

“Poison? That certainly could cause trouble.”

“No kidding. You wouldn’t think they were that brutal, looking at the guys from Sym walking around town. But from what I’ve heard, they wander all over the continent without any bodyguards, so they must not be afraid of beasts or bandits.”

As they were having that conversation, their destination came into view. Since it was ultimately a straight road, there was no real risk of getting lost.

Located nearly at the dead end of Drunkard Way was a row house that looked practically deserted. The building was one story with six units all in a row, and was so old and worn down that it could collapse in on itself at any moment. In fact, it looked so bad that it seemed hard to believe people could really live in such a place.

“But that bastard Sanjura was staying at The Sledgehammer, right? So is this thug who’s supposed to be staying here someone else?”

“I do not know. It is possible he prepared this dwelling in advance so he could run away after committing his crimes at that inn.”

At any rate, they couldn’t exactly turn around without checking after coming all this way. And so, Yumi gathered up her resolve as she had when visiting Dattas’s home, approaching the closest door and knocking on it.

She waited for a bit, but there was no response.

Right when she lifted her hand to knock again, though, she heard the bolt being removed from inside.

“What a racket. All our rooms are full right now, y’know.”

“Ah, are you old lady Jillel? We’re actually not here looking for lodgings,” Yumi replied while forcing down the shock she was feeling.

It wasn’t Jillel’s appearance that was surprising, though. Rather, it was the thick, offensive odor that wafted out when the woman opened the door. It was a strange, sweet smell that was utterly unfamiliar to Yumi and put her in something of a daze.

“Is that an herb from Sym? Did the easterner who came to live here recently share it with you?” Yumi asked, causing Jillel to guardedly furrow her brows.

The woman was terribly old and small. She was bent over at a near right angle, and she leaned heavily on a cane. Her greasy gray hair was pulled up into a bun atop her head, and her skin was like dirty tanned leather.

“We came here to check whether or not that easterner was an acquaintance of ours. Is he here in the row house now?”

“An acquaintance, you say...? He shouldn’t know anyone here in Genos...”

“Do we have the wrong guy, then? He’s got light hair, which is rare for easterners.”

Since it was possible he gave a fake name, Yumi avoided saying it.

Meanwhile, Jillel’s brows furrowed even deeper with more and more suspicion.

“Whatever, I don’t need any trouble... And who are those folks, anyway?”

“They’re people of the forest’s edge. A clan who hunt giba at the base of Mount Morga.”

At that point, Jillel almost shoved her way past Yumi as she moved outside, skillfully closing the door behind her with her cane.

“I won’t know if he’s out or not without checking. Guess I’ll go ahead and collect his rent while I’m at it.”

“Thanks. This is a big help.”

The old lady bobbed along unsteadily, with Yumi and company following after her.

Before long, she led them to the dwelling on the other end of the rowhouse. Once they arrived, she lifted up her cane and gave the door a rough poke.

“Hey, you’ve got visitors! And could I get tomorrow’s rent, too?!”

There was no response.

After a short while, Jillel reached out toward the door with her withered hand. Apparently it hadn’t been bolted, as it smoothly swung open.

It was pitch black inside the room.

And sure enough, there was an offensive odor hanging in the air. This time, it was a sort of mix between a sweet and sour smell, strong enough to seriously turn one’s stomach. And somehow, it seemed to have a sort of animal-like stink to it, too.

“Hey, are you there?! It’s no good... It’s too dark to see a thing.”

“If it’s alright, please allow me to take a look,” Gazraan Rutim said, stepping forward as Jillel moved aside.

However, the young hunter ended up giving a light tilt of his head, too.

“There’s a curtain or something dividing the room, so it’s impossible to see all the way inside. And... there’s some kind of strange presence, too.”

“Whaddya mean, a ‘strange presence’? You’ve got my permission, so go ahead and drag whoever’s in there out. If he went and died in my place, that’d be a real hassle.”

With a single nod, Gazraan Rutim stepped into the darkness without the slightest hesitation.

And as they watched, Jillel gave a curious little, “Oh? What’s this? Can you two see?”

“Hmm? It’s so dark I can’t even tell what I’m looking at,” Yumi answered as she and Morun Rutim peered into the room.

There was a curtain over the window too, so it was as pitch black as night inside. All she could make out was Gazraan Rutim’s back as he cautiously proceeded inside.

“Yeah, it’s just too dark to—” Yumi started to say, only to be suddenly pushed from behind.

Morun Rutim had been in front of her, and so she slammed into the girl’s shoulder as they both tumbled into the entrance.

And then, the world suddenly went dark. The door had been slammed shut.

“Oww... Hey! What’re you doing, you old hag?!”

Yumi hurriedly sat up and searched for the door by touch. For some reason, though, it wasn’t budging in the least, as if it were just another wall. Yumi felt a chill run down her spine as she sat there in that pitch black darkness.

“Hey! Stop messing around! Let us out of here!”

“Quiet, Yumi... Something’s not right...” Morun Rutim chimed in as she grabbed hold of Yumi’s arm.

In the next moment, an eerie cry pierced the darkness.

On top of that, there was a flapping and a sound like a cloth being beaten. It

seemed to be the wings from some sort of animal flying about.

“Aah!” Yumi shrieked, holding her head in her hands.

She had felt something swoosh right by her ear.

“Morun! Keep your head down! These beasts are dangerous!” Gazraan Rutim shouted out, which was followed by the sound of something being torn down, followed by an animal’s shrill cry. It seemed the hunter was fighting the winged beasts in the dark.

“Flee outside! These beasts seem to be able to sense where people are, even without any light to see!”

“The door won’t open! It’s probably been bolted or something from the outside!”

“Understood! Then hold on for just a moment!”

The beasts’ constant flapping was all that gave them away as they flew overhead. Though they didn’t seem all that big, apparently there were several of them. And for a moment, Yumi felt as if she was trapped in some sort of nightmare.

Meanwhile, the sounds of battle continued on unabated. Yumi felt out Morun Rutim’s hand and held it tight, praying to the western god for this to end.

“Morun! Don’t move from that spot!”

Gazraan Rutim’s voice was suddenly drawing closer.

Then, something massive whooshed over their heads, and the door flew open. It seemed Gazraan Rutim had come running their way and kicked the door down.

The thick door went flying to the other side of the street, allowing light to stream in once more through the hole it left behind. And wasting no time at all, Yumi and Morun Rutim beat a hasty retreat into that light.

Following soon after, Gazraan Rutim leapt out backwards, brandishing his blade. He stood to guard the girls who were sitting collapsed on the road, pointing his sword straight at the gaping abyss where the door once stood.

“I believe... those were what are known as bats.”

“B-Bats?”

“Yes. I’ve heard that they occasionally appear at night at the forest’s edge, too. They’re dangerous creatures that not only suck the blood of people and beasts alike, but their fangs are also venomous.”

However, those winged creatures showed no signs of trying to leave the dark room. Did they have trouble handling sunlight?

“Morun, Yumi, you weren’t bit, were you?”

“We weren’t, since I kept on swinging this about,” Morun Rutim replied with a smile, holding out a wooden pole. Yumi hadn’t noticed at all, but apparently she had been using that to drive off the bats.

“So you were shut inside, correct? Was that old woman named Jillel the culprit?”

“That’s right! Where did that damn hag go?!”

Yumi hurriedly glanced about, but there wasn’t a single person to be found out on the road. She must have hurriedly booked it as soon as she locked in Yumi and Morun Rutim.

“Still, why exactly was she trying to do us harm? Does she have some sort of grudge against us people of the forest’s edge?”

“We won’t know that without asking her! For now, let’s at least try heading back to that room from before!”

Since her legs were bad enough to need a cane, it was hard to imagine she had run all the way to the other side of the road. But sure enough, once they made it back to the door on the other end, it was bolted from the inside.

“So you really are in here, huh?! Hey, you old hag! You’ve really done it now! What do you have against us, anyway?!” Naturally, there was no response. And so with a click of her tongue, Yumi turned to face Gazraan Rutim. “Hey, this isn’t getting us anywhere, so just go ahead and smash this one down too!”

“Ah... But I can’t say I feel right about kicking down doors left and right...”

“It doesn’t matter if you feel right about it, we can’t just forget about the old hag and leave, right?!”

With a rather apologetic look on his face, Gazraan Rutim went ahead and gave the door a hearty kick. It immediately came loose from its frame, tumbling down into the entrance.

Right inside sat a dirt floor, and beyond that there was an empty room. Off to the left was a stove which had a small metal pot on it. The flame was out, but the sweet smell in the air seemed to be coming from that direction.

Looking opposite the stove, Yumi found a large curtain blocking her view. That must have been the entrance to another room.

After looking the room over, Gazraan Rutim cautiously moved in that direction. And while keeping an eye out to make sure nobody was coming in from outside, Yumi and Morun Rutim followed after him.

Keeping a hold of his blade’s handle with his right hand, Gazraan Rutim grabbed the lower part of the curtain with his left. And when he suddenly pulled it up, an old woman’s shriek filled the room.

Naturally, that had come from Jillel.

She was cowering there in the corner of the small room, her face as pale as a sheet.

And there was someone else there next to her, too. This person wore a long, raggedy cloak, and jangling accessories around his neck and wrists... And he was an eastern man that had to be at least as old as Jillel.

His hair was a mix of its original black and a good bit that had gone white, giving it the overall impression of rusted steel. Plus his face was incredibly wrinkled, and though he would probably be quite tall if he stood up, his body was thin and shriveled.

“Aah, please forgive me! This man has grown so weak that he couldn’t possibly get up to any wrongdoing! It would be far too cruel to take him away as a criminal, wouldn’t it?!” Jillel sobbed as she clung to the easterner’s slim frame. And as she looked at the pair, Yumi gave a disappointed slump of her shoulders.

“So that old guy’s the easterner living here in this row house? Now listen, the man we’re looking for is a young guy from Sym perfectly capable of getting into trouble!”

“Huh? Then you didn’t come here to capture him and take him away...?”

“We’ve got no reason to go thrust some total stranger in front of the guards! Geez, you sure jumped to one heck of a conclusion there...”

As that back and forth was going on, the old man from Sym just sat there, his expression utterly unchanged. Of course, that made sense considering easterners thought it was shameful to let their emotions show.

“It seems you were rather troubled on my account... Jillel is innocent, so please find it in yourselves to forgive her...”

“I don’t know if I’d call her innocent, seeing how those bats or whatever could’ve easily ended up sucking our blood.”

“Those bats were captured to be used for medicine... I truly am sorry...”

“Hmph. You know, you sure are skilled in the western tongue, old timer.”

Furthermore, this man only seemed to be able to see properly out of one of his eyes. There was a dark yet calm shine in his right eye, but his left one was a murky gray.

“We’re searching for a criminal named Sanjura. Just to be safe, let me ask, do you know anything about him? He’s got light-colored hair and eyes and said he had mixed blood from the east and west, but just from looking at him, he seemed like an ordinary young man from Sym.”

“I do not know him... I am a criminal who cannot show his face in Sym, so I cut all ties with easterners... And I can’t say I ever knew anyone with mixed blood from the east and west, either...”

“Is that so? That’s too bad. He’s a heartless bastard who kidnapped a good friend of mine.”

“He kidnapped your friend, you say...? I see...” the old man from Sym murmured, closing his right eye. Meanwhile, his cloudy gray eye alone looked straight at Gazraan Rutim. “Does that friend perhaps lack a star...?”

“What did you say just now...?” Gazraan Rutim questioned, furrowing his brow ever so slightly. His light brown eyes always looked so calm, but now they appeared as sharp as a blade.

“You fall under the hawk star, guarded by three lions... And you all shall face a great shift in destiny under the light and shadow of the starless one...”

“A great shift...” Gazraan Rutim whispered back, taking in the words.

As for Yumi, she had no idea what was going on.

“Since that man lacks a star, even I cannot decipher his fate... It is in the process of shifting even now... Even if you have lost sight of him, the starless one is above you always... And once the clouds clear, you shall be able to see him once again...” Then, with Jillel still clinging to his thin shoulders, he leaned limply against the wall behind him. “That is as far as I can see... If it was enough for you to forgive the trouble Jillel caused you, I would be most appreciative...”

“Understood. You have my thanks for this favor,” Gazraan Rutim said, taking his hand from his blade and turning around. As he let go of the curtain it fell back down, once more hiding the old pair from view. “Let’s head back. I don’t believe we have any further business in this place.”

“H-Hold on a moment! What was all that gibberish about? Was that guy an eastern star reader or something?”

“Yes. A star reader from Sym called Asuta a starless one once before in the past. I can’t say I understand star reading, as it seems like a mere consolation to me... But I do feel it relieved at least a little of my unease.” As they exited Jillel’s home and stepped back out into the bright sunlight, Gazraan Rutim broke out in a gentle smile. “Naturally, that’s not to say we should sit around waiting for Asuta to return. I intend to carry on with whatever I can do to help.”

“Of course! Well then, let’s check down the other way next!”

“Right,” Gazraan Rutim replied with a nod.

Yumi had felt before like she had fallen deep into some sort of nightmare, but as she looked at Gazraan Rutim’s firm yet gentle smile, she somehow managed to pull herself back together.

Three days later, at night...

Yumi, Gazraan Rutim, and a great crowd of others had gathered together in front of the castle gates, all awaiting Asuta's return.

Both people of the forest's edge and townsfolk were there, all wearing tense expressions. Was Asuta really alright, and would he truly be safely returned to them...? All they could do was keep on earnestly praying for it to be so, despite their doubts.

"It's alright. If that Jeeda boy's words were true, we should absolutely be able to rescue him," Gazraan Rutim whispered from beside Yumi, sounding as if he was trying to persuade himself.

Asuta was in the castle town. The one who had him abducted was the daughter of a noble named Cyclaeus, and she was forcing Asuta to cook for her. That was the message that had been delivered this morning.

It was still unknown if that was even true. But the people of the forest's edge trusted that it was, and put together a plan. Currently, that Ai Fa woman who was Asuta's family had infiltrated Cyclaeus's manor along with some noble.

"We intend to await their return outside the castle gates. Would you mind joining us, Yumi...?" Gazraan Rutim had come and asked her.

"Of course. I've got no reason to object. But... why?"

"We wish to make Cyclaeus and his ilk aware that the truth has already spread outside of the walls of the castle town. Otherwise, it's possible that he will try to cover up this entire incident."

Though she didn't really get it, Yumi complied with his request. Over the past several days, she had become painfully aware of the fact that he was at least as smart as anybody from around town, if not more so.

And Yumi had reached out to other townsfolk in turn, leading to the huge crowd gathered now. There were a number of fearful guards surrounding them, but that wasn't enough to scare off even a single person from the group.

By this point, the sun had already completely set. Right in front of the group

stood the white stone walls, atop which a number of flames flickered away in the darkness.

The drawbridge was up, and the gates were shut. On top of that, there was a deep moat in front of the walls, placing the crowd at a distance. It was far enough that you couldn't even hit it by throwing a rock. And Asuta was being held captive on the other side of those sturdy walls.

"Yumi..." a voice called out as a small figure approached. It was Tara, the daughter of that vegetable seller. She had met the girl numerous times back at Asuta's stalls. "Is Asuta alright? He's definitely coming back, isn't he?"

"It'll be okay. It'll take more than this to get rid of him, you know," Yumi said, kneeling on the ground and giving a firm nod.

With tears in her eyes, Tara nodded back, "Yeah," and then went running back over to her father.

"There's no need to worry. Since we asked that Polarth noble for his assistance, they shouldn't be able to take any extreme actions, either," Gazraan Rutim stated as Yumi stood back up. All the while, though, his gaze remained fixed on the gates.

"Guess you need a noble to punish a noble in the end, huh? Even though we worked pretty damn hard..."

"Even now, you're helping us further. We need the assistance of everyone here in order to continue down the proper path forward. To begin with, if we hadn't caused such a commotion throughout town first, I doubt we would have moved that Polarth noble enough to take action," Gazraan Rutim said, gently smiling while still facing the gates. "People of the forest's edge, townsfolk, and nobles of the castle town... It is precisely because all those various groups have come together in their thoughts and actions that we find ourselves here in these current circumstances. Thinking about it, this may just be further proof of the bonds Asuta has formed."

"Hehe. I wonder if Asuta'll treat us to some delicious food for making us worry?" Yumi said, putting on a brave front, only for a sound like an animal in its death throes to fill the night air.

The drawbridge had begun lowering.

Without even thinking, Yumi leaned forwards.

With a heavy *creeeeek* the drawbridge steadily approached the ground. The guards were all nervously brandishing their spears, looking around to see if anyone present was going to make any trouble.

Then, there was a thump and a rumble as the drawbridge fully lowered.

At the same time, the massive gates swung open.

It was like some huge monster's gaping maw had suddenly yawned widely before them, revealing pitch black darkness inside.

And from those shadows, a single vehicle steadily emerged: a big box carriage pulled by two tolos. And it was surrounded by tolos riders on either side, too.

Someone seemed to gulp.

And then, everyone fell dead silent. The crowd was holding its breath, watching and wondering whether or not Asuta was okay. Suddenly, Yumi realized that her knees were trembling.

"It's alright..." Gazraan Rutim quietly whispered.

The tolos-drawn wagon stopped before fully crossing the bridge.

Then, it turned around and headed back toward the gates... Leaving two shadowy figures standing there.

Instantly, there was an explosion of cheers.

One of them was undoubtedly Asuta.

Yumi closed her eyes and gave a prayer of thanks to the western god. It might well have been the most earnest prayer she had ever said in her whole life.

From beyond the jubilation, there was another heavy sound ringing out. Opening her eyes, Yumi saw that Asuta and his companion had already stepped off the bridge, and so it was once more rising up.

There was already a large crowd of people around Asuta, shifting constantly as one person after another pushed forward to see him. Some were hugging him, and some were even sobbing.

“Oh forest, I thank you for the kindness you have shown...” Yumi heard Gazraan Rutim say. When she turned and looked, she found he had closed his eyes and was offering a prayer of his own. “Now then, you should go see Asuta too, Yumi.”

“You want to run straight at him too, don’t you?”

“I’ll take my time later... Sad as it is to admit, I find my legs shaking a bit.”

“What a coincidence. It’s the same for me,” Yumi replied, and Gazraan Rutim smiled back. Only this time, rather than his usual gentle grin, it looked closer to that of a bashful child.

“Yumi, you’ve truly been a great help. Now that Asuta is back safely, I can finally say it...”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Three days ago, when I was looking for Asuta with you and Morun, it felt sort of like I was a kid again. It was honestly a bit... fun.”

Yumi shot him back a puzzled stare. But then, she answered his embarrassed smile with one of her own.

“This really *is* a coincidence! I feel the same way.”

With that, Yumi took off running toward Asuta.

The boy looked like he was laughing and crying at the same time.

Still unsure just what she should ultimately say to him, Yumi simply worked up her resolve and shot him a smile.

And so, Yumi and Gazraan Rutim at last had their precious, irreplaceable friend returned to them.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the 11th volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

If it was published as scheduled, then it must be right in the middle of the rainy season. That's quite a temperature difference compared to May when I'm writing this afterword, so you readers must be feeling quite worn down.

But at any rate, this is volume 11.

During this book, Asuta finds himself in quite a pinch.

I'd prefer to avoid spoilers here for those who read the afterword first, but I'd imagine you may already have some idea from the cover, color images, taglines, and the like. But as I'm writing all this, it's still unclear to me exactly how that will play out.

Were Asuta and Ai Fa in unfamiliar clothing? Did any new characters appear in the color images? I'm honestly excited to see just what sort of art Kochimo will deliver.

Oh, and this time around I had extra pages to play with, so I ended up putting together an intermezzo that was on a bit of the long side. Around 50 pages or so, I'd say. It's probably the second longest, after "Aperitif: The Hunter's Path" way back in volume 2. Even though the main story certainly isn't shorter than that volume, I just couldn't stop myself from writing more and more.

There isn't any logic to making the bonus stories as long as I can, but I just find it easier to write longer vignettes than shorter ones.

Plus, it's the least I can do as a show of gratitude for those who read the web version but still pick up these volume releases. I truly hope that you enjoy them.

As for the bonus content this time, it ended up being a bit of an experiment.

Writing stories set in the past that are unrelated to the main book is all well and good, but since things were so urgent this time around in the volume itself,

I wanted to try writing out what was happening behind the scenes.

However, I already released such a story in the web version. As long as things keep going smoothly, it should appear in the 14th or 15th volume.

After racking my brains on what to do, I ultimately decided to write about how things played out in the post town rather than at the forest's edge.

And for the protagonists, I chose a pair who hadn't had any contact up till now. It was a very novel and enjoyable experience as the author, writing interactions between a duo with such different personalities and backgrounds.

I also currently have no intention of introducing the titular Drunkard Way from the tale into the main story. Writing about a place Asuta will never see from a whole new perspective really was fun for me.

Are the residents of Drunkard Way spending their days out of Asuta's view even now? Maybe they'll suddenly appear looking all innocent to order food from Asuta's stalls. I find such thoughts fluttering through my head.

At any rate, though, I only have a little space left for this afterword.

I've made it all the way here to volume 11 so quickly, so those of you who have joined me on this journey truly have my gratitude.

As always, let me finish by giving thanks to my editor at Hobby Japan, my illustrator Kochimo, everyone else involved with the production of this book, and of course all of you who purchased it.

I hope to see you all again with the next volume!

May 2017,

EDA

Bonus Short Story

The Eldest Sons of the Ruu and Rutim

Gazraan Rutim first encountered that person on the day that the head of the main Lea house got married.

The women under the Ruu had all gathered together in the plaza in the center of the settlement, and had been preparing for a banquet. It was in the midst of this that the two of them met off to the side of the plaza.

“Who are you...?” Gazraan Rutim called out because he spied the unfamiliar face.

The response he got back from the wary boy was, “I’m Jiza Ruu, son of the main Ruu house’s head, Donda Ruu.”

“Ah, I’ve heard rumors about you for some time now... I’m Gazraan Rutim, son of the main Rutim house’s head, Dan Rutim,” the older of the two precocious boys said.

“So you are Gazraan Rutim? I’ve heard tell of you, too.” As he replied, Jiza Ruu’s narrowed eyes calmly stared back at Gazraan Rutim. Normally they would make it look as if he was smiling, but instead he was making a rather unique expression there. “So, what is the heir to the main Rutim house doing here on his own?”

“I thought maybe I could do something to help, so I was looking for anything I could work on. What were you up to?”

“It was much the same for me. After all, it’s my first time participating in a banquet, so I don’t know how these things are done.”

With that, Jiza Ruu turned his gaze towards the plaza. Since the sun was high in the sky, the men were still out in the forest, and the only ones there were women.

“Isn’t it unusual for the subordinate clans to gather this early, even for a

wedding banquet...?”

“Yes, but since the Ruu clan women alone weren’t enough, we all came here.”

“I see. A number of children were born to the Ruu branch houses recently, so that may be why we were shorthanded. My apologies for the inconvenience.”

“Think nothing of it. The Lea clan are also precious relatives to us too, so we’re happy to have such a chance to help out with the wedding banquet preparations. With that said, though, it’s not like I’m doing anything to help out now...”

“It’s the same for me, too. I’m looking for anything I can do so that I won’t be seen as useless.”

With that, one of the women busily working away noticed them and came running over. She was the wife of the clan head Donda Ruu, and Jiza Ruu’s mother, Mia Lea Ruu.

“Why, if it isn’t Jiza and Gazraan Rutim. What are the two of you doing standing around in a place like this?”

“Yes, well, we were wondering if there was anything we could do to help, and were looking for work we could take care of,” Gazraan Rutim replied.

“I see...” Mia Lea Ruu said back with a tilt of her head. “Then could you look after the young children gathered in the house over there? There are already a number of women on the job, but they must have their hands full taking care of the newborns.”

Children under five couldn’t participate in banquets, so they were all gathered together in one house. And it made sense women cradling young infants would have trouble handling energetic three-and four-year-olds on top of that.

“Understood. Well then, shall we get going, Jiza Ruu?”

“Right. We’ll finally be helping out, it seems.”

As she looked back and forth between the pair, Mia Lea Ruu broke out in a truly radiant smile.

“The two of you are already so mature. If everyone were like you, we’d really have no trouble at all.”

As Gazraan Rutim stood there taken aback and turned to face Jiza Ruu, he found the boy shooting him much the same look.

This was when Jiza Ruu was just five years old, a year younger than Gazraan Rutim, and was the first time he ever participated in a banquet. In other words, it was eighteen years in the past.

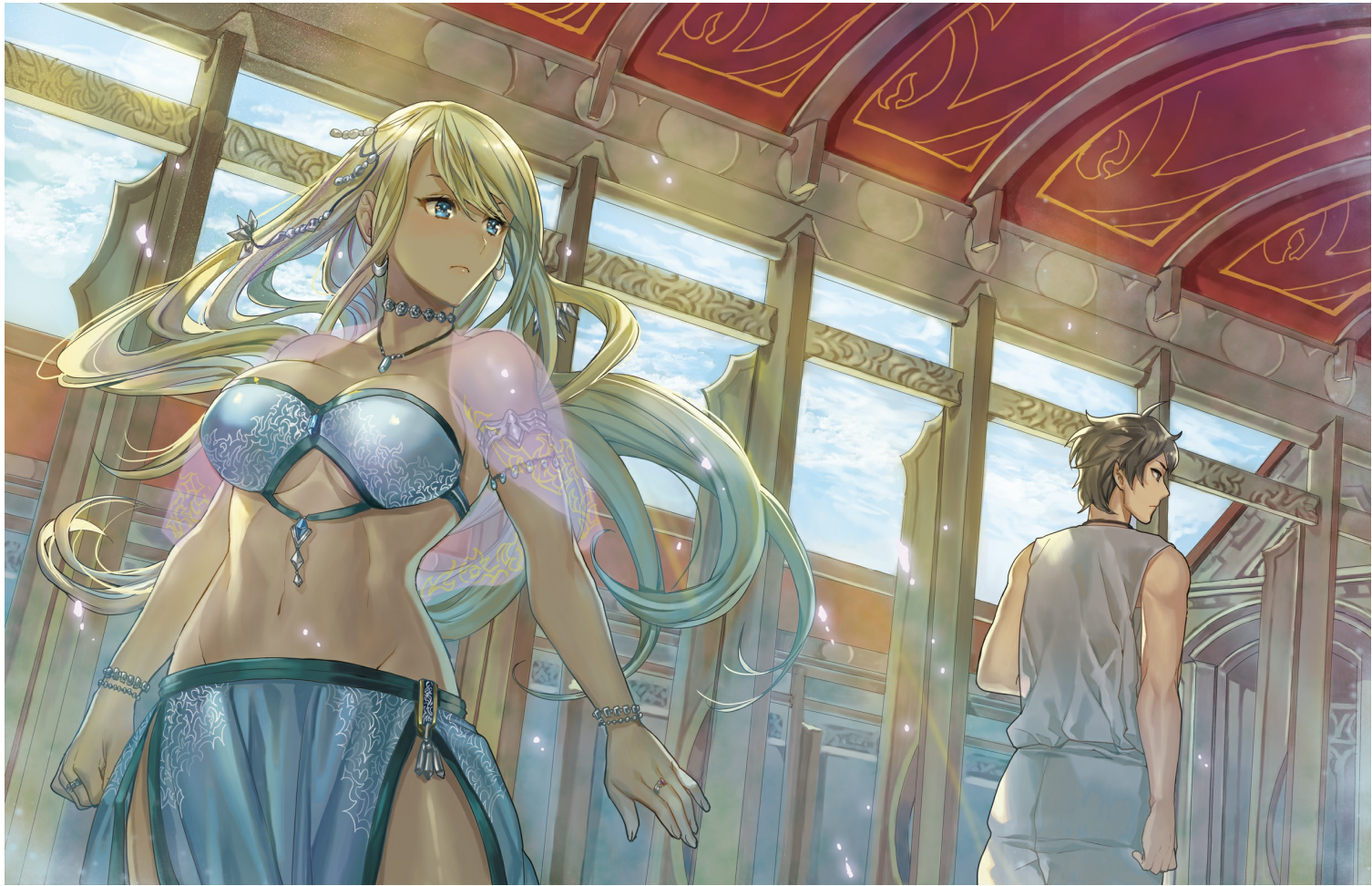








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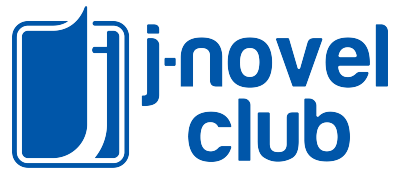
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 11

by EDA

Translated by Matthew Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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